

CQ CONGRESSIONAL TRANSCRIPTS
Congressional Hearings
Feb. 4, 2009

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Holds Hearing on Servicemembers Quality of Life

LIST OF PANEL MEMBERS AND WITNESSES

(NOTE: INAUDIBLES THROUGHOUT DUE TO COMMITTEE'S HEARING ROOM AUDIO)

EDWARDS:

I'd like to call the committee to order. And I want to welcome everyone here, the witnesses, the members of the committee, and all the others for your attendance here today at our first subcommittee meeting of the 111th Congress.

Our ranking member, Congressman Wamp, is back with us. And I want to thank you personally, Mr. Wamp, for your tremendous leadership and a lot of the very positive accomplishments of this subcommittee last year. And as I recall, our last bill passed by -- that was about 424-4 or something close to that. So I really appreciate the bipartisan manner in which this committee has been dedicated to supporting our veterans and our troops and their families.

We have two new members of the subcommittee, but I'm not going to introduce them until they arrive here.

I would like to just start out with a few organizational comments and points before we get into the -- the witnesses' testimony.

I want to say right at the -- at the top of the meeting...

(UNKNOWN)

Mr. Chairman, how are you?

EDWARDS:

I would like to say at the very beginning here that I think we're literally blessed to have one of the finest staffs of any committee or subcommittee in the -- in the House. They work on a bipartisan basis. They know their business. And I think they're the real reason why we've had such great successes in this committee

in the last few years, as well as previous years.

We have Carol Murphy as the clerk, will be back as the clerk for this subcommittee. We also have Mary Arnold (ph).

And if you could all raise your hand when I introduce you. Tim Peterson (ph), Donna Chavez (ph), Walter Hearn (ph), all on the majority side. And on the minority side, we have Martin Delgado (ph), Liz Dawson (ph), and Kelly Shea (ph).

And while I introduced them as majority and minority side, this committee will continue its tradition of working on a bipartisan and nonpartisan basis on behalf of our veterans and our troops and their -- and their families.

I would like to just very briefly, for the record, since this is the first meeting of the subcommittee for the year, review some of our efforts and achievements from last year.

For the Veterans Administration, we followed up on the largest single-year increase for veterans with an additional \$4.5 billion increase. We provided funds to hire an additional 2,000 claims processors to reduce the serious V.A. backlog claims.

We reopened the doors of the V.A. to some of the middle-income priority (inaudible) all together, we increased veterans funding by \$16.3 billion during the 110th Congress, an unprecedented increase and something that I believe the troops and our veterans earned (inaudible) these were dollars that -- programs that -- benefits that they -- they earned through their service to the country.

On the military construction side, we provided over \$25 billion in new funding for 2009. We were also able to make progress on a couple of areas where we identified a great need.

Between the 2008 and the 2009 supplemental bills, the 2008 supplemental and the 2009 bill, we were able to secure nearly \$975 million for new military hospital construction, an initiative of this subcommittee and something I think has been long overdue.

And we secured \$200 million in additional money for new training barracks, something that hasn't been the highest of priorities coming out of budgets from OMB.

But I personally believe we -- while our new recruits aren't expecting to be trained and live in Hilton Hotels, we ought to have them living in the kind of housing conditions that show respect from our country for their choice to sign up and serve our country.

So I'm very proud of our bipartisan effort to make new inroads in improving our training barracks. Not many lobbyists out there are lobbying for 18-, 19-, 20-year-old recruits to the military forces, but this subcommittee intends to continue

being a lobbyist for them in partnership with you, who's been such an eloquent voice on their behalf.

We -- before I proceed, I'd like to recognize again Mr. Wamp, who had such a tremendous impact on the success that I have mentioned.

The time is yours.

WAMP:

Well, Mr. Chairman, thank you. Good morning.

I think it's really appropriate to start here with the top enlisted leaders of our combined Armed Forces. Probably the only better way we could this if we had your family members up here (inaudible) heart is and where this committee's work is. Quality of life is really everything for us.

And still a tough world to serve in out there, and we know that, and we want to make sure we do everything we can here at this table -- I want to thank the chairman, because I think he's exactly right. We've got a lot to -- to be grateful for in terms of what this (inaudible) first and foremost, your service and all the men and women that you represent, that this subcommittee has in a bipartisan way really kicked it in and stepped it up.

And I tell people that at home and everywhere I go how committed in a bipartisan way we are to your families and to those men and women who volunteer to serve at a very difficult time. And I think we have made progress, but I think we can still make progress.

A little housekeeping here. I have Major Juan Alvarez (ph) that is now on my staff, staffing me back here, Major, and Aaron Fogelman (ph). I've been through a little transition.

But I want to tell you something that maybe sounds a little strange to say, but I'm now up to seven on our side in the seniority of the ranking members. And unlike the Democrats, who base their seniority on the particular subcommittee that they choose, we can move.

And we had three retirements ahead of me on our side, and I could have gone a number of other committees. I said, "I want to stay right here, because this is the most (inaudible) work that I can be engaged in." And I'm actually doing two jobs right now. I'm running for governor of our state and serving here in Congress.

But as long as I'm here, it is absolutely the highest privilege of my professional life to serve those that serve our country in uniform, our Armed Forces in a volunteer capacity, with two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and trouble in 25 countries (inaudible) and so just a -- it's a volatile time. It's a tough time. But there's no greater service to our country than the people that you represent.

And I especially appreciate you four men, because just about every one of you has got some real direct connection to the state of Tennessee. So I just want to thank you for that.

(LAUGHTER)

(UNKNOWN)

All right, sir.

WAMP:

And I know the chairman's going to find all those nexus to Texas, but it's undeniable how much they know about where I live. And I, too, have been out there.

I was with President Bush in November on the ground at Fort Campbell, listening to our soldiers, many of whom are single. We've got housing needs for -- for those single troops that are serving us. We've got a host of needs still in the area of childcare centers. And I know that the chairman is trying any vehicle passing through town here to help us. And that's important, as well.

But we are so very grateful. And it is such a privilege. Our numbers shrank over here. We had four members of the subcommittee besides me. Now we have three. And Mr. Carter will be here, but the same team, which is a strong Republican team over here (inaudible) commitments here to our men and women in uniform.

And we stand ready over the next two years to do everything we can to help our chairman and to help the majority and the president of the United States honor your sacrifice and your service. And I'm really looking forward to it. We'll do all that we can at a time of -- of great challenge and difficulty, both on the budget front and around the world, to -- to honor what your (inaudible) and I just want you to know that going in.

It's going to be a great year. And thank you for your presence here today. I hope that you will tell us what we need to hear and not what we want to hear as we go through this process. I know you're in charge with doing that to the generals, and I hope you'll be the same way with us this morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

Great. Thank you, Zach.

And let me just say, as a Texan, having studied the Alamo, even we Texans

are appreciative of Tennesseans (inaudible) as long as I'm chairman of this committee and as long as Chairman Young chooses to be on this subcommittee, it's going to be my tradition to recognize him for an opening statement, as well, because he has done as much or more than any single member of Congress to support our troops and our veterans.

And the former chairman of the full Appropriations Committee, former chairman of the Defense Appropriations Committee, now the -- the partner. Mr. Murtha is the ranking member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

And, Chairman Young, we're honored to have you again in this Congress on our subcommittee. And I'd like to recognize you for any opening comments you'd care to make.

YOUNG:

Well, Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. And I fought hard to stay on this subcommittee when -- when we were having to downsize somewhat. But when it comes to the well-being of the men and women who serve in our military, there's - - there's no Republicans and no Democrats, especially on this committee (inaudible) committee, the chairman has conducted this subcommittee in just a tremendous bipartisan way, in the best interests of our country. And Mr. Wamp has done the same.

And we're here -- I know you hear this as a joke on occasion -- but we're here to help, actually. I'm not sure whether you have seen your specific budget for your service or not, but I don't think we have, have we, Mr. Chairman?

EDWARDS:

No.

YOUNG:

We haven't gotten the budget yet. But we know that -- regardless of what the budget is, there are needs that our men and women need. And we're counting on you to tell us what those needs are, because I can guarantee you that this subcommittee, the members of this subcommittee are going to do whatever we can possibly to meet the needs to improve the quality of life and to take care of some of those little problems that are out there that sometimes we don't hear about.

So I'm going to ask, Mr. Chairman, that, as they go through their testimony, just pretend like we have a magic wand up here and tell us some of the things that we might not have -- might not have read or we might not have heard about. Tell us some of the things that we need to be doing in the interests of our military personnel.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Mr. Young.

Let me welcome two new members to our subcommittee, Congressman John Salazar and Congressman Steve Israel. We're thrilled to have both of you here.

And let me just give you a brief background. Congressman Salazar was first elected in 2004. He is a new member of the Appropriations Committee, but he's not new to defense issues. He served in the United States Army, a distinguished career there from 1973 to 1976. He also reflects his values by having served on the Veterans Affairs Committee. He was born and raised on a farm, still an active farmer, and a Blue Dog Democrat.

John, we're very thrilled to have you. Would you care to make any statement in your first subcommittee meeting?

SALAZAR:

Well, I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, it's really an honor to be able to serve on this subcommittee. It was one of my first choices. And I want to thank you for the opportunity.

As many of you know, the Salazar family has had a long history of serving this country. My father was a World War II veteran, asked that he be buried in his staff sergeant World War II uniform, and he was. And many times -- we don't ask much of our country, but we ask what we can do for our country.

Thank you for your service.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is truly an honor for me to be able to serve on this committee.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, John. We're honored that you're on this subcommittee.

Steve Israel is a member of Congress from the great state of New York. He was first elected in 2000, became a member of the Appropriations Committee in 2007. He is also not (inaudible) to defense issues on several points.

He previously served on the House Armed Services Committee, founded the bipartisan House Center Aisle Caucus, and very importantly has been chairman of the House Democratic Caucus Task Force on Defense and the Military. He's

particularly known for his leadership on professional military education issues, in addition to other areas of interest to him.

Welcome to the committee, Steve.

ISRAEL:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

And I'd like to recognize you for any comments you'd care to make.

ISRAEL:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and colleagues. And I truly am honored to be on this subcommittee.

One of the -- if there was only one regret in coming to the Appropriations Committee, it was that I had to leave the Armed Services Committee. And I told the speaker, my heart remains with the Armed Services Committee. My wallet is with the Appropriations Committee.

(LAUGHTER)

And I've always had a longstanding interest, working with Chairman Skelton, on the issue of professional military education (ph) and how we're equipping our forces with the -- the software that they need to become effective and remain effective warriors. I look forward to continue to work with you on (inaudible) thank you all.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Steve. Welcome back.

And welcome back -- welcome, as a new member of the subcommittee. And welcome back, also, to all the returning members today. It's an honor. I think this is a great, great subcommittee.

Let me make a fairly brief opening statement. This is our first hearing of the year. I think it's a reflection on our respect for your leadership and the difference that you have made from your previous year's testimony.

We felt, as Mr. Young alluded, we felt it wasn't even important to wait until we have an official administration budget request, that whatever the needs are that are out there that you've identified (inaudible) our troops and their families need to

be heard now, as we begin our -- our budgeting process.

Members, today's hearing is on the quality of life for enlisted soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, and their families. The four witnesses at the table are the senior enlisted members of their respective branches. Members should know -- and this is amazing -- that these four witnesses represent roughly 124 years of distinguished military service and experience.

This hearing is a great opportunity to identify areas where we can do more to serve those who serve us. And as I mentioned to some of you I met with yesterday, literally, if you ever wonder all the trouble you go to testify on Capitol Hill, does it make a difference?

Literally, the comments you made about the need for child development centers over the last several years is the reason why we have added several hundred million dollars to those programs, and particularly the point being that we have a lot of single moms and dads, while their spouses are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan on a first, second, or third tour that deserve and need that -- that daycare.

So you have -- you have made a difference. And we know you will continue to.

Our witnesses today are, first, Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth Preston. He is no stranger this subcommittee.

Welcome back, Sergeant Major.

He was sworn in to his present position on January 15th of 2004 with over 33 years of service in the United States Army. He was command sergeant major for Combined Task Force 7 in Baghdad prior to becoming sergeant major in the Army.

And I anticipate Sergeant Major Preston will introduce him formally, but I also wanted to pay special tribute to Command Sergeant Major John Gipe of the National Guard and also Command Sergeant Major Leon Caffie of the Army Reserve.

Thank you. Thank you both for your leadership and for being here today, as well.

Sergeant major of the Marine Corps is Carlton W. Kent. Sergeant Major Kent is a returning witness and became sergeant major of the Marine Corps on April 25th of 2007. He also has 33 years of military service.

And we thank you for those distinguished years of service, Sergeant Major. He served as sergeant major of the Marine Forces, Europe, and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force at Camp Pendleton prior to his current position.

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Rick D. West, Master Chief West is a

first-time witness here. And this is a friendly committee.

(LAUGHTER)

Mr. Young meant it when he said we are here to help. We're not like some of these committees trying to make points with cameras or reporters. We're here to hear from you, and we do welcome you to our subcommittee.

Master Chief West has about 28 years of service in the Navy, entered the Navy straight from high school in 1981. And he is a submariner. His assignments include service on the staff of the commander, Submarine Force of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, and chief of the boat aboard the USS Portsmouth.

Most recently, he served as fleet master chief of the U.S. fleet forces (inaudible) and I will let Master Chief West introduce him formally, but I want to note that Force Master Chief Ronney Bright from the Navy Reserve is also with us.

(UNKNOWN)

Wright, sir.

EDWARDS:

Wright. I'm sorry, Wright. He's a bright Wright.

(LAUGHTER)

(UNKNOWN)

(inaudible) same thing, sir.

EDWARDS:

Thank you for that. Well, welcome. It's good to have you here, also.

(UNKNOWN)

Glad to be here.

EDWARDS:

As well.

Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Rodney McKinley. Chief McKinley is a returning witness, as well.

Chief, welcome. Welcome back to our subcommittee (inaudible) present position in 2006, June 30th. He has served in the Air Force for 30 years, and beginning in 1974 with a five-year break. He served as command chief master sergeant at the wing, Numbered Air Force, and major command levels and deployed to southwest Asia in support of OEF and OIF.

Thank you again for all being here. And if you can just be patient for one or two more minutes, I'd like to just lay out a couple of ground rules as we have agreed to them for this -- this new Congress for our subcommittee.

First, I will do everything I can to begin the committee hearings on time. I respect your schedules. We're not going to have you sitting here for 20 minutes waiting for a 10 o'clock hearing to begin at 10:30.

For the members present in the room when I gavel at the beginning of the hearing to open the hearing, I will recognize the members for questions in order of seniority, alternating between the majority and minority.

For those who arrive after the hearing has started, I will recognize those members solely in order of arrival, not in order of seniority. And then the order will continue through all rounds of questioning.

I will do my best to try to enforce the five-minute rule on questions and answers. We'll do this out of the hope that in this subcommittee, unlike the Armed Services Committee, Steve, we'll have opportunities to have multiple rounds of questioning. And that might work better if we tried to not have our members make a five-minute statement and ask 20 questions in the last 15 seconds of that.

So what I'm going to do is I will gavel once when there's a minute left. I'll gavel twice, and I would ask the witnesses to finish your -- your sentence when I have gaveled (inaudible) follow-up questions for -- for the members.

With that, we'd like by tradition to begin with Sergeant Major Preston.

PRESTON:

Mr. Chairman, thanks very much.

Congressman Wamp, Congressman Young, all the committee members, thanks very much. It's a great honor to be here and to testify again before this distinguished committee. And I represent all the men and women of America's Army.

And I will start out by saying that your support this past year and your continued support today has had a tremendous impact on our soldiers and our families. And on behalf of all them, I just want to say thank you for all your work

and effort.

I also want to recognize Command Sergeant Major John Gipe, who is the command sergeant major for the Army National Guard. And, of course, he is the senior enlisted adviser for Lieutenant General Bond for the Army National Guard.

And then Command Sergeant Major Leon Caffie, who's the command sergeant major for the Army Reserve. And he works as the senior enlisted adviser for Lieutenant General Jack Stultz. And both those gentlemen represent 518,000 (ph) citizen-soldiers out there that serve every day.

Today, the Army has more than 245,000 soldiers forward-deployed to 80 countries around the world. We have more than 139,600 soldiers currently deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

General Casey early in his tenure as our Army chief of staff searched for a way to describe the state of the Army. And he uses the term "out of balance," broken or hollow, but the arrow of persistent global conflict has strained our Army resources, our soldiers, our Army families, and our equipment, to a point where we are consumed by the demands of the current fight.

The Army has four strategic imperatives to restore this balance. We must sustain our all-volunteer force, our soldiers, our Army civilians, and their families. We must prepare our forces for success in the current conflict. We must reset our soldiers and their equipment returning from the deployment. And we must transform to meet the demands of the future and provide our soldiers, our Army civilians, and their families with the predictability and stability that they need.

With your support, we intend to restore this balance to the Army. Our recruiting and retention programs are a success. Last year, we recruited over 169,000 young men and women, all great soldiers. We re-enlisted 120,000 soldiers to retain in our units. This past July, we celebrated the 35th anniversary of the all-volunteer force.

And your support is directly attributed to our success, and it's greatly appreciated.

We are seeing indicators of stress on the force as we enter the eighth year of the global war on terror. The Army had an increase in suicide rates for the fourth consecutive year. There were (inaudible) suicides last year, with 15 additional cases still pending determination. The total number of suicides is potentially 143. We continue to look for initiatives to increase resources and enhance our efforts to identify, intervene and prevent suicidal behavior.

The plan for this year is the implementation of a comprehensive soldier fitness program. The vision of this program is an Army whose resilience and total fitness enables them to thrive in an era of high op-tempo and persistent conflict.

Child care is a top quality of life issue. Our goal is to achieve the OFC

standard (ph) of providing 80 percent childcare and 35 percent of the youth program demand by the end of F.Y. '09. We currently can provide about 72,500 childcare spaces in support of our anticipated need of about 87,500 by F.Y. '13.

Our residential communities initiative is a successful tool in our efforts to eliminate inadequate family housing. At the end of this year, we will complete the privatization of 44 of 45 installations, with over 89,000 homes. By 2011, we will complete the privatization of about 98 percent of our stateside family housing inventory.

Our permanent-party soldier barracks goal is about 170,000 adequate soldier spaces funded by the end of fiscal year '13. Allowing two years for construction, we will not complete the barracks building plan until fiscal year '15 for our permanent-party soldiers.

We have a plan to maintain safe living conditions in our old Korean War-era barracks until enough new facilities are build to house our permanent-party soldiers.

Our training barracks goal to support soldiers attending initial entry and professional development schools across the Army is 115,413 adequate soldier spaces funded by the end of fiscal year '13. Allowing two years for construction, we will not complete the barracks building plan until fiscal year '17.

And, of course, when you look at some of our facilities that are out there, you know, the soldiers attending the Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, live in World War II wooden barracks.

We completed standing up and manning 36 warrior transition units and nine community-based warrior transition units across the (inaudible) to support 12,000 soldiers. These facilities have a singular focus on warrior healing and support (inaudible) to families.

We hired 191 of the needed 254 new behavioral health providers this past year, which adds about 16,000 additional appointments a month. Shortages of medical providers in military treatment facilities is one of the top five issues identified by soldiers and families in our most recent Army family action plan conference last week.

I want to thank the committee for the increased focus on our aging health care facilities over this last year. Our medical facilities are well maintained and operated, but many are more than 50 years old and not configured, nor constructed to provide the range of treatments available in modern medical facilities.

I am proud that this year we will (inaudible) 2009 as the year of the noncommissioned officer. During this year, we will accelerate previously approved strategic noncommissioned officer development initiatives that enhance training, education, capability, and utilization of our noncommissioned officers.

Mr. Chairman, committee members, thank you, and I look forward to your

questions.

EDWARDS:

Sergeant Major Preston, thank you very much.

Sergeant Major Kent?

KENT:

Thank you, Chairman Edwards, Ranking Member Wamp, and all of the subcommittee members for an opportunity to testify on all important issues that's affecting our Marines and their families today.

The well-being of Marines and families is the most important priority for our corps. Your Marines are serving at every U.S. embassy throughout the world. They are engaged on several fronts. They're serving aboard the U.S. ships with our brothers and sisters in the Navy, and they're waiting on the call to go in harm's way.

Marines are very proud to serve their country and their Corps. I am pleased to report that the Marine Corps is making positive changes for Marines and their families that will benefit them for generations to come.

We are making strides (inaudible) quality of life of our families. We like to thank you all, you know, for what you have done for our BEQs (ph), for our housing, and, I mean, across the whole spectrum. And we see that in our Corps.

As a matter of fact, I have a quick story that I told Congressman Edwards yesterday. I was standing talking to a young corporal on a visit recently. And I said, "Are you planning on staying in the Marine Corps?" The young corporal was getting ready to answer it. Then his wife jumped right in. She said, "Yes, he's staying in the Marine Corps, because I like the housing, I like the commissary, I like childcare, I like everything that comes with the Corps."

So it is the families just keeping these Marines around. So thank you very much, you know, for what you do for our Corps. And, again, I am available to answer any questions.

EDWARDS:

Great. Thank you very much, Sergeant Major.

Master Chief West?

WEST:

Yes, sir. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, Congressman Wamp, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and represent our sailors and their families in this forum.

On December 12th, the day I took the job, I told our young men and women that nothing would be more important to me than providing them the avenues to succeed as sailors and as Americans. I view this time with you as an unparalleled opportunity to speak on behalf and uphold the promise that I made to them.

Joining me today is Force Master Chief Ronney Wright, who represents our reserve force, the finest group of citizen-sailors that this nation has ever seen.

Force Wright and I believe that three traditional pillars are critical to the success of our service: strong decisive leadership (inaudible) consistent and clear communications up, down and across the chain of command, and education to our fleet and their families regarding the quality of life and family support programs that are available to them.

Consistent support from Congress and a continued emphasis on these pillars will ensure all of our sailors are ready for any mission any time, anywhere. Your commitment to our sailors and the unconditional support to the families both contribute equally to our Navy's success and our ability to protect America's strategic interests around the world.

Over the last few years, cooperation between this subcommittee and our Navy leadership has led to impressive progress in health care, childcare, family housing, and many other support programs. However, we will need your support as we focus on upgrading our existing barracks and providing more quarters to support our (inaudible)

Approximately 9,000 of my sailors today live on board ships. Before I'd taken this job, I had the privilege of leading sailors as master chief on both the Pacific and the Atlantic fleets. I've met and talked with thousands of our great sailors. They inspire me daily, and I'm happy to report morale is high and retention is strong.

Our Navy mission is more diverse than ever before. I've seen sailors -- our sailors operate on and below the oceans of the world, in the air, or boots on the ground with our expeditionary forces or as individual augmentees as we prosecute the global war on terror.

And I'm continually amazed to see the caliber of these sailors working side by side with our Marine Corps brothers and alongside our Army and Air Force counterparts.

They may not have joined with that job in mind, but every day they're redefining their role as a United States sailor. Your sailors stand ready.

But sadly to say, some of these sailors return (ph) to their families. They present us with a serious national responsibility. As a Navy and through your leadership, we are continually improving the support and care that we provide our wounded warriors. Our commitment to the heroes and their families will never waver.

But today I come before you not only as the nation's senior enlisted sailor, but also with a Navy dad. Just (inaudible) when I saw my eldest son graduate from Navy boot camp. And a few months later, I attended his graduation from Navy dive school.

In the near future, his younger brother plans to follow. I'm proud to tell you that these young men elected to follow in my footsteps out of patriotism and sense of selfless service to our nation, but I will also tell you the fact -- another fact is they've chosen to join our Navy -- the reason they joined our Navy is the lifelong exposure that they've had to the Navy way of life and to the military quality of life that this subcommittee is chartered with.

And they've seen my wife, Bobbi (ph), a former Navy Seabee, who doesn't have to worry too much about my safety, but now she understands firsthand what so many of our American parents have discovered, that a child in harm's way is a kind of stress you can never prepare yourself for.

Mr. Chairman, committee members, it is not lost on me that you and I share very similar responsibilities. I know that your dedication to our military is stronger than ever before and that your loyalty to our families are limitless. You have my most profound respect for that and for your continued dedication to each of them.

I look forward to working with and alongside each of you today and in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today, and I look forward to your questions. Hooah.

EDWARDS:

Thank you. Master Chief West, thank you for your eloquent first statement before our subcommittee.

WEST:

Thank you very much.

EDWARDS:

And thanks on behalf of all of us for your entire family's service to our country.

WEST:

Thank you very much.

EDWARDS:

Chief McKinley, welcome back to our subcommittee. I'd like to recognize you now for your opening statement.

MCKINLEY:

Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, Congressman Wamp, Congressman Young, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today about issues important to America's airmen and our Air Force.

I'm honored to be here alongside my fellow warriors (ph) as we collaborate on quality-of-life issues impacting all of our servicemembers and their families. I want to take this opportunity to thank the members of this committee and the entire House of Representatives for your incredible support.

Your Air Force appreciates greatly the expansion of pay, health care, and retirement benefits for servicemembers and veterans and visits by the House members to our personnel in the field and to our wounded warriors.

Thank you also, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for recommending additional Air Force infrastructure funding in the House Appropriations Committee's economic stimulus package. Quality facilities and services directly impact our mission and retention efforts, so we especially appreciate this recommendation to invest in our future.

Mr. Chairman, we also thank you for your continued sponsorship of the Military Child College Affordability Act in which states offer resident rate college tuition to our military families.

Recently, our Air Force has had some challenges in our nuclear enterprise. We learn we needed to improve in many areas. But under the leadership of our secretary and chief of staff, we have met those challenges head-on to ensure we have the right focus.

We've stood up the Air Force global strike command provisional to handle our nuclear missions. We now have the right organizational emphasis, as we steward this very important national resource.

America's airmen continue to deliver outstanding capabilities to the battlefield. In the war on terrorism, more than 208,000 total force airmen are

engaged in the joint and coalition fight. We are supporting daily operations in the air, on the ground, in space, in cyberspace.

We are filling joint expeditionary taskings, formerly known as in-lieu-of taskings, where our deployed airmen work alongside soldiers, sailors, Marines, and coast guardsmen on missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the globe.

We are focused on cyberspace, unmanned aerial systems, and the United States African Command. Security of cyberspace is of great importance not only to our Air Force, but also to our joint partners in our nation. Security of the nation's net-centric information architecture requires more than DOD emphasis, so we have committed to working transparently with our interagency partners, as well.

Our unmanned aircraft systems are directly supporting warfighters on the ground, Air Force Predators, Reapers, and Global Hawks are finding, fixing, tracking, and attacking our enemies. The intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance capabilities these system provide are critical to battlefield operations.

We have increased from 12 UAS combat air patrols in 2007 to 33 today. To further support African Command, we have a new numbered Air Force, 17th Air Force. We are gearing up to support the extensive airlift requirements of that new command, as well as humanitarian assistance, security operation, improved aero-safety and security, and assisting our African partners with their efforts in these areas.

We are constantly expanding care for our wounded warriors. Our warrior and survivor care program cares for airmen and their families through treatment, recovery, and into the post-separation period.

We are also working with our joint partners on special monthly compensation, which will assist the families that have catastrophically wounded servicemembers toward maintaining financial balance with their loved ones during recovery. This compensation is intended to help family caregivers in meeting recurring monthly expenses, such as rent, credit card, and car payments while they are at the bedside.

Our recruiting efforts continue to be successful, despite the decreasing eligibility pool due to increases in the nationwide school dropout rate, a more obese youth population, and other reasons. We met our 2008 recruiting goals and (inaudible) to meet recruiting goals in all three areas of our total force: active duty, Air Force Reserve, and Air National Guard.

We have experienced a few decreases in our retention numbers. In fiscal year 2008, overall active-duty Air Force retention rates finished slightly below annual goals, while Guard and Reserve officer enlistment rates met or exceeded their retention goals.

Although overall active-duty retention is trending slightly upward for this fiscal year, the 2009, some of our critical and stressed specialties continue to

experience significant shortfalls.

We've continue to use selective re-enlistment bonuses and quality of service initiatives to resolve these shortages. We appreciate continued congressional support for these incentive efforts.

Childcare continues to be important to our airmen and our families. With the current economic situation, many of our spouses must work to supplement the family income. We have made good progress in providing affordable childcare, and we will continue these efforts. Right now, we have need for about 1,900 childcare spaces and would like to cut that to zero.

Thank you all again for your continued support for our airmen. On behalf of America's airmen, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to your questions.

EDWARDS:

Chief McKinley, thank you for your testimony. And thank you all for beginning this year's subcommittee hearings in a very positive way.

Mr. Wamp, I want to personally thank you for choosing to remain as ranking member of this subcommittee. I think that's a reflection upon your values and commitment to this committee's work. And I'd like to recognize you to begin this year's (inaudible) meetings.

WAMP:

Thank you for your courtesy and your leadership, Mr. Chairman. You're a class act.

And this is an impressive lot here. I have to tell you, it's emotional and kind of charges you up (inaudible) the men and women that you represent just to hear your passion and your commitment to them.

I'd start on the troop side. And this suicide rate issue is the canary in the mine, in a sense. I know this is kind of the toughest place to start, but it kind of speaks to the overall health and wellness of our men and women.

Is it just kind of more the tempo, the deployment stress? Is it battle and the asymmetrical nature of the battle? From each of your perspectives, representing those men and women who are at risk and that take us to this place of looking at 143 potential suicides, what are the primary factors? And is the family and our quality-of-life issues connected to it?

Or is it -- I mean, this tempo has got to be driving a lot of stress, but -- or tell me.

PRESTON:

Sir, I'll start. As I look at it, I say it's the tempo. It's the pace, and it's the dynamics of all the things that are occurring in young people's lives.

And we go back to it, and we track all the statistics and the analysis behind, you know, why a young person felt they had to -- felt obligated to commit suicide and what pushed them over the edge. And, you know, a lot of it's failed relationships.

And, you know, as I travel around the Army, the biggest question that I get from young soldiers and families is, you know, Sergeant Major, when are we going to start to see something (inaudible) 12 months of dwell time between deployments? And, you know, it's those who are deployed, those that are coming back.

But even those, when you look at the numbers, you know, there's a third of those suicides that have never been deployed. And, of course, it's those units that are left behind. They're also working very hard, as well.

And it's the pace. It's the tempo. It's society. It's packing up and moving from one location to another. It's selling their house, you know, trying to get out of an upside-down mortgage. It's moving their children from one school to another school. And it's transferring the school credits from one school to another school.

It's all of those dynamics mixed in that add to the stress in a young person's life. And I look at it -- I mean, you could look at from, you know, how many have been deployed or not deployed versus, you know, the majority are married, you know, more than 50 percent of the suicides have been back from a deployment well over a year.

So there's a lot of dynamics that you can look into it. And, of course, we look at every one of those cases, you know, very seriously. It's a tragedy. And, you know, in each one of their families, it's a crisis, you know, because their families are directly affected.

And we're doing a number of things, you know, to get at, you know, impacting that this year and (inaudible)

WAMP:

Before we go down the table, Sergeant Major, you've got the Guard and Reserve leadership behind you. Is there a differential between the Guard and Reserve and the active component in this suicide issue?

PRESTON:

The numbers that I gave you include the Guard and Reserve. This is, you know, all those Guard and Reserve, as well as the active-duty soldiers that are serving on active duty. And that's how we capture those.

WAMP:

Right. And, I mean, is there an abnormal ratio of active versus Guard and Reserve? It's just across the board?

PRESTON:

Across the board. In fact...

WAMP:

It could indicate how much the tempo and the stress is the primary factor, not necessarily the battle or the nature of the battle.

KENT:

We are concerned, also, sir. We went from 33 fiscal year '07 to 41, so we increased by eight. What we're doing, we think that the small-unit leaders are the one closer to these young Marines. So we're educating our corporals and sergeants so they'll know the symptoms and they know how to get help for these young warriors.

But we are concerned about it. And we're keeping an eye on it.

It's a combination of things. And that's why we want to grow the force fast, and we are, so we can get the Marines more dwell time back in the rear, you know, because right now they are seven months deployed and they're seven months back.

WAMP:

Just to interrupt you, the Marine Corps is recruiting gangbusters. What do you attribute that to right now, sir?

KENT:

We're not recruiting gangbusters, sir. I would tend to say that we're not...

(CROSSTALK)

KENT:

Excuse me, sir?

FARR:

You can have all my gang members, if you...

(LAUGHTER)

KENT:

Now, sir, let me tell you about the process of recruiting. Right now, we're at a 97.8 percent high school graduate average. The way the process works, if they need a waiver, you know, if they have a criminal record and they need a waiver, it just don't start at the recruiting station. It's forwarded all the way up to the commanding general of this whole recruiting command.

And let me give you an example of the waivers. If you got a young guy, 13 years old, go out and they see a tractor and they decide to jump in this tractor, and this tractor is worth \$20,000, and they get pulled over by the local authorities, when they're 18, although they got pulled over when they was 13, that's a felony.

But as they went from 13 to 18, they did great things and they graduated. They was a star in football. But it was a felony, and they need a waiver for that, you know, and that's the kind of people that we would probably bring in.

But as far as gangbangers, sir, you probably saw them that actually, you know, slipped through the cracks.

WAMP:

I just meant you're meeting your goals (inaudible) that's what I'm talking about.

KENT:

Oh, sorry, sir. I'm just rattling on when you say "gang," "gang"...

WAMP:

(inaudible)

KENT:

OK, OK, sir, yes...

(CROSSTALK)

WAMP:

(inaudible) meeting your recruitment goals.

KENT:

Sorry about that, sir. I'm just rolling on, sir.

WAMP:

(inaudible) the Marine Corps at a time of incredible stress. And these guys are looking, and they're talking to their peers that are already serving, and they know it's hard and tough, but the...

KENT:

I misunderstood you, sir.

WAMP:

I know.

KENT:

You know, yes, we are, sir.

WAMP:

There's a lot of pride in being a Marine, and it's a good product to sell, right?

KENT:

Well, actually, sir, we're going to make our end-strength of 202,000 two years early. We're going to hit it in three years, sir, which is amazing.

WAMP:

Master Chief?

WEST:

Yes, sir. As far as suicides, we had a slight increase this year. When we dug into it, obviously, what some of my (inaudible) here talked about were financial responsibility, that type of items.

What I found out that was I guess an interesting stat was 39 percent of our suicides were facing disciplinary action already, so that gave us another indicator. That's 39 percent of them.

We had 39 this past year, all of them are serious. But we put things in place, such as the operational stress control. We've really ramped up the financial counseling for these individuals, obviously, from this subcommittee, you know, by folks on payday lenders, but to ease some of that.

Everything's serious with that, but overall our numbers are fairly steady, sir.

WAMP:

Chief Master Sergeant?

MCKINLEY:

Yes, sir, our Air Force leadership, we're very concerned about this. For the last 10 years, our average per 100,000 is 9.7 per 100,000. But right now, it's up to 12.3. So that's a significant rise of us. And so we're very concerned.

If you peel all that back and look at the reasons why, a big percentage of that is these marriage issues, relationship issues that leads to suicides. And you go peel that back, probably. I think the stresses that each one of us are talking about, not only with deployments, with mission, but also with the financial crisis going on in America that affects every person, not only civilian, but also gets into the military families.

And I think that adds to the stress that's out there, not only our military members, but to the spouses, to the children. And more stress on the family leads to things like this.

And so I think that's kind of the (inaudible) like I said, our Air Force leadership is very concerned, very committed that we lower this. We want it to be zero. That's probably unrealistic, but we're going to do everything we can to combat this and take care of our members, sir.

WAMP:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Zach (inaudible)

KENNEDY:

I have trouble believing there's not a differential between the Guard and Reserve and the standing military in terms of the percentage of suicides. At least with the standing military, you have embedded support systems, whereas with the Guard and Reserve you don't.

They're just dumped back after they come back from, you know, a mission, and they don't have -- they're spread out. They don't have their colleagues, their counterparts, their peers around them to give them the care, support and everything.

So does that just bear out in the statistics at all?

PRESTON:

In fact, the numbers (inaudible) talk to that, but I think it was (inaudible)

(UNKNOWN)

None so far this year. Our numbers were up last year, sir. They're up a little bit more for the first quarter of this year.

DICKS:

Is this Guard or Reserve?

(UNKNOWN)

Guard, sir. There's other influences on the reserve components (inaudible) active components (inaudible) like the economy. So (inaudible) overseas (inaudible) lose their jobs. They lose their jobs while they're back home, things like that (inaudible) active component doesn't see.

But, overall, there's not a huge difference between what we see and what they

see. The rates are up, and we are addressing this.

EDWARDS:

Sergeant Major, could I interrupt and ask the transcriber -- can you hear the testimony from the first row?

(UNKNOWN)

Yes.

EDWARDS:

You can pick that OK? If you can't, you let me know. Raise your hand or something.

(UNKNOWN)

Thank you.

EDWARDS:

Appreciate that.

(UNKNOWN)

I can definitely speak louder if I need to.

KENNEDY:

Sorry, Mr. Chairman (inaudible) we have this whole issue of whether state commandants could call up their Guard and reservists so as to keep the morale and the cohesion of the unit together when they weren't off on duty so as to build that (inaudible) morale, you know, which was precluded under the previous law, so when (inaudible) during their mission, they were precluded from calling up there.

PRESTON:

That's (inaudible) they're doing that when they come back from deployment. It's allowing the leadership to put eyes all on those soldiers who are deployed to bring them back in for (inaudible) make sure that they're doing OK so they're back with their battle buddies again.

But, you know, that's the commander on the ground. That's leadership making that (inaudible)

(UNKNOWN)

(inaudible) local level.

EDWARDS:

Let me just say, before I recognize Mr. Farr, Mr. Kennedy kind of foreshadowed what I'd like to do.

I'm going to wait for my question until the end of the first round, but I'd like to say to Master Chief Wright and Sergeant Major Gipe, Sergeant Major Caffie, if you could be thinking, my question will be of each of the three of you is, are there are some particular quality-of-life issues that you'd like to talk about that may not be unique to the Guard and Reserve, but they're a little bit different than those quality-of-life issues being faced by the active-duty servicemen and women?

Mr. Farr?

FARR:

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And thank you for your leadership and that of Congressman Zach Wamp in last year's augmentation. It's the largest in history and I think it's having some beneficial effect.

You know, it's interesting, this committee not only deals with active-duty military, but we deal with the veterans. So if, indeed, problems are caused, we're going to end up picking up the pieces. And I think what we're trying to do is make sure that the entire experience in service of our country is so much better integrated, both in uniform and out of uniform, and I think needs even more work with communities.

And, you know, because I heard you speaking. And I (inaudible) echo everybody (inaudible) appreciate your incredible years of service. And I thank everybody in uniform for (inaudible)

It appears to me we're kind of -- we recruit (inaudible) join the services. And then when you join, you build the esprit de corps. And it's really an incredible experience and team, and it's done extremely well.

And then we provide the (inaudible) assistance to the families. And we (inaudible) to do that, but we really are (inaudible) community housing, with childcare, with recreational centers. I mean, you build a whole kind of (inaudible) and so on, a community of support that is second to none.

It seems to me where we fail in our society in general -- and then, obviously, and you put -- I know the Navy has operational stress control and the Marine Corps has OSCAR, the mental health program.

But we have still not made it very acceptable to get counseling. And I wonder if you -- and it seems to me there's sort of two cases here of how we try to deal with what we think might be PTSD or -- one is, how do we integrate in the services that counseling is, you know (inaudible) quality counseling, and it's worked. And it has some benefits.

But at the same time, it seems to me what we're forgetting is that we need to engage the community, because the -- we've done that engaging the bases, with the community and the public school systems, where you have this town-gown relationship, but not with the soldier in the mental health field.

And that seems to me that's a real struggle, because the veterans, you know (inaudible) you muster out. You get sent back to your community. You may be a heck of a long way from a veterans clinic or a veterans hospital. And there are mental health services in that community, but nobody in the Veterans Administration or the military knows about that.

I mean, that's where, it seems to me, this whole mental health field, we need a better integration in our town-gown relationship. And I just wondered if you could list for us some of the needs you may have along these lines of counseling, and PTSD, and continuing support systems?

PRESTON:

Sir, I'll start. We've made a lot of progress in this area. And when you talk to soldiers, and especially their families, their concern is, you know, when you look at the medical health care professionals working on an installation, of course, those medical professionals deploy along with those units and organizations on that installation, as well.

So, you know, their biggest complaint, when it comes to medical health care -- and that's across the board for all services -- is the accessibility and availability to be able to get an appointment. Very satisfied with the quality of care that's being provided, but it's just accessibility and availability.

Now, one of the things that, you know, our medical command and specifically the Army surgeon general, Lieutenant General Schoomaker, and the command has done is really to expand that, as you were talking about, into the communities to partner more with those off-the- installation medical facilities to be able to open up and provide more appointments.

But the challenges, too, specifically in the area of mental health care is -- there's just not a lot out there in (inaudible) community. And, you know, we've been working right now to increase those numbers in our recruiting efforts, but, you know, we still have a long ways to go.

FARR:

(inaudible) other services?

KENT:

Pretty much, yes, sir.

(UNKNOWN)

Yes, sir.

FARR:

Are there any needs that aren't there and we need to put some more resources
(inaudible)

WEST:

Sir, I think, from the Navy perspective, we've come a long way, similar to all the other services, through our Safe Harbor program (inaudible) it's phenomenal (inaudible) San Diego not too long ago, as a matter of fact, last week (inaudible) looked at the Safe Harbor and how it integrated with the local, state community governments and (inaudible) San Diego area.

EDWARDS:

I know I'm going to end up cutting off some good answers, but I think, as long as the committee supports this, we're going to stick to the five-minute rule and then that'll allow each member a second and third round. And if at any point the committee wants to talk about doing it differently, I'll certainly respect that.

The next -- thank you. Thank you, Mr. Farr, and for your leadership on mental health issues, both for the active duty and (inaudible) you've been a real leader on those issues, among others.

Our order will be Mr. Young, based on when they came in to the meeting after starting, Mr. Young, Mr. Crenshaw, then Mr. Bishop.

Mr. Young?

YOUNG:

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much (inaudible) conversation...

DICKS:

I want to ask a question.

EDWARDS:

Yes?

DICKS:

We're going to not go back and forth?

EDWARDS:

Well, what we'd said for this first meeting -- I was just talking to Walter about that -- the first meeting we announced, we're going to -- after the meeting begins, Norm, we're going to...

(CROSSTALK)

DICKS:

You always go back and forth from one side to other.

EDWARDS:

And I think we may go to that in a second meeting, but since I had announced before you came in...

DICKS:

I didn't hear you announce that.

EDWARDS:

Yes, what we announced might have been before you came in. After the meeting...

(CROSSTALK)

DICKS:

Oh, I listened to what you said. That's not what you said.

EDWARDS:

We'll go by seniority first and then, after we go by seniority, we'll go based on when members come in. I think what I may add to the second meeting is, once we get beyond seniority, it's based on who comes in, we'll go back and forth, but I'm going to stick with what our intention was today.

If I didn't make that clear, I apologize to you and the other members, as well.

Mr. Young?

YOUNG:

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

In the conversations have evolved around an issue that is extremely important to our military, to our country. When our oldest son was finished with his time in the military and his deployment to the Mideast, he said, "Dad (inaudible) our troops need psychological help, and there's just not enough professional care available."

So when he was discharged, he came and he has just -- he's two months away from becoming a psychologist. And his intention is to re-enlist in the military to be available to help some of these kids, because he saw the troubles.

Now, my question then is, where are we, as it relates to the young troop that needs counseling, needs psychological help? Where are we on the availability of that type of help in your services?

PRESTON:

Sir, I'll start. This past year, we hired 191 of the 254 that we had planned for, health counselors to put out there within our (inaudible) stations.

But the challenge, I know, for the medical professionals is really finding them. There's a shortage of medical health care professionals across the nation. It's doctors and nurses, you know, across the board. But, you know, we're working very hard to recruit those medical health care professionals to fill the vacancies that we've had.

The other piece of that, too, is, of course, tied in with the other types of counseling that are done within a (inaudible) organization. It's the chaplains and

those type of community counselors to take care of our families that are either at home or through the Army -- Army OneSource, Military OneSource, to be able to provide that as an outreach for those soldiers like the Guard and Reserve that are serving in remote sites, as well as their families.

KENT:

We're actually doing OK right now, sir. We're actually putting specialists in units that's forward deploying right now. And we're doing good, but we still have a shortage of them. And we think that's the key, you know, to put somebody in there. When they forward deploy, they would have somebody for counseling.

WEST:

Yes, sir, we're also doing well overall. This is the first year in a while that we've met our medical recruiting. We did that through a very aggressive push (inaudible) and different groups out there. But it takes a while, as you know, to grow those specialists.

But we're out there. We're using all available assets to (inaudible) our chaplains play a big part in that. And (inaudible) training in different areas of leadership-type (inaudible) so we can see that, along with those folks that are funneling in to go do those missions.

YOUNG:

You're right about how long it takes to prepare them. I know how long it's taken our son to get this degree and to become a psychologist. So you're right about that.

MCKINLEY:

Congressman Young, for the Air Force, we have 400 mental health professionals that are trained by national PTSD experts in advanced PTSD treatment techniques. So we have, you know, a good amount out there.

We also have a lot of other programs, like afterdeployment.org. We have Military OneSource. But I really think probably the best thing is that (inaudible) out there (inaudible) the people that they work with and being able to recognize when someone's behavior has changed and be able to take that through the chain of command and get that person help.

YOUNG:

Well, I'm glad to hear that the services are aware of the problem and doing

something about it. Well, I think we have a lot -- we do have a lot more to do. And the availability of the professional counseling is really a major problem.

Mr. Chairman, the -- the Intrepid foundation -- I think most of us know about the Intrepid foundation -- have volunteered to raise money to build a facility in Bethesda to deal with post-traumatic stress issues. And the money is going to be -- the money to build the building is going to come from private donations.

In fact, I'm going to ask the -- if I can be excused in about 10 minutes, because I'm going to meet with Mr. Arnold Fisher, who is the head of the Intrepid foundation, to get the details on where they are on raising the money. And I believe he's about to report that all of the money that is necessary for the construction is now committed.

EDWARDS:

Is that the...

(CROSSTALK)

YOUNG:

When I get up and leave, that's where I'm going.

(UNKNOWN)

That's great news.

YOUNG:

But we appreciate -- this is not a pleasant subject, dealing with suicides and dealing with these stress issues, but it's real and we can't -- I think even Congress has probably overlooked it for too long and hoped that it would go away. But it's not going to go away.

And I'm surprised that Sergeant Major Preston (inaudible) bit of that himself, because when my wife finds problems in the Army, he's one of the first ones she goes to, to say, "Hey, here's a problem. You fix it." So I'm surprised he doesn't have a lot of gray hair. And Beverly (ph) gave that message to Sergeant Major Chen (ph) last night.

(UNKNOWN)

(OFF-MIKE)

EDWARDS:

Can you say it in a sentence?

WEST:

Yes, sir. I was just down at Balboa. And what I was really impressed with, there were Army, Marines and sailors out there at the Balboa hospital. I could not be more impressed with the interaction with all those groups, doing the right thing.

EDWARDS:

Good. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Young...

YOUNG:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

... for your meeting with Mr. Fisher.

So we're clear, members, the order of questioning will be Mr. Crenshaw, Mr. Bishop, Mr. Dicks, Mr. Israel, and then Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Crenshaw, welcome back to the subcommittee. Thank you for your past leadership. It's great to have you back.

CRENSHAW:

Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, you know, I guess I've been on the Appropriations Committee for eight -- this is my eighth year. And I've been on this subcommittee for eight years (inaudible) Mr. Young kind of put me on this committee. It's the only real subcommittee I've ever asked to be on.

So I'm glad to be back, Mr. Chairman, working with you.

EDWARDS:

Good to have you.

CRENSHAW:

Mr. Wamp, glad you're still the ranking member. As he said, the way the Republicans work, you get to be a ranking member based on your seniority. The Democrats, they have a -- I think they have a pretty good way, because it's based on the seniority on your subcommittee.

And in that case, I would be more encouraging to Mr. Wamp to leave. But, unfortunately, I'll be here -- sitting here right here next year under a new guy (inaudible) the ranking member.

But I want to welcome you all back. I haven't met our Navy fellow. I've got two Navy bases and a Marine base in my district, so welcome. And great to see you all again.

I always think of this as kind of a time where we just sit down and talk. Mr. Chairman, when I travel around to different naval and military installations around the world, I kind of try to take some time and just quietly talk to the men and women and say, "Look, if you had a chance, just between you and me, what would you say to a member of Congress, if you could talk about what you like and what you don't like?"

And you get mixed reactions sometimes. Sometimes they're very straightforward; sometimes they're a little nervous. But I look at this meeting as kind of one of those kind of meetings. It's not quite as private as those conversations that we have in South Korea or Iraq or wherever.

But I really appreciate you all's candor and straightforwardness when you come here and talk about the things that are important to you and the men and women you represent.

And so the big issue I wanted to talk about is -- and I think it kind of affects everybody in our country, and that has to do with this overall economic crisis. You all touched on it in your testimony about how that affects your quality of life.

But in particular, I was just thinking that, in terms of housing, because we've got the three bases in our communities -- and in most places, when people buy a house, you know, they think that's a great investment and it's an important investment.

And if people are in the military, they decide to move, they can sell their house. In today's world, they find out their house probably isn't maybe worth as much as when they first bought it. And so folks in the private sector can say, "Maybe I won't move. Maybe I'll just stay right here."

But as you know, the men and women you all represent get a new assignment, they've got to leave a community. And I just wonder if (inaudible) Florida and California and Texas, some places where the real estate market's been hit pretty hard, and they don't have a luxury of kind of waiting, I'd love to hear

from you all if you have any firsthand experiences of how that's impacted people that you represent and how they deal with it.

Are there foreclosures taking place? Are people kind of walking away? Are they trying to rent their houses?

And I know we passed some legislation dealing with BRAC, if you moved -- and there was kind of a BRAC impact, and there was an assistance program, Mr. Chairman, that you (inaudible) the ranking member really helpful with getting that started, is something like that needed? Are we getting to that point?

So could -- I'd love to hear kind of firsthand what you all are seeing.

PRESTON:

Sir, I just -- and we don't know the exact numbers out there that, you know, with the current economic crisis and the impact right now on those homeowners, but what we do know is -- and this is just from experience from a lot of the soldiers out there that I've talked to that have had to pack up families and move.

In many cases, they're leaving their families in place because they can't afford to sell their house. They can't afford to move out. So now what you end up with is a lot of geographical bachelors. You know, you have the soldier moving to the next installation or to the next duty station and leaving (inaudible) behind.

So (inaudible) we're working now to really understand the dynamics. And one of the things that we want to do in the Army is to take the homeowners assistance program, which was really designed to help (inaudible) affected by BRAC.

And because of, you know, post (inaudible) that are closing down, you have a glut of housing that's in that area, to really help them sell their houses and move, they're now looking at expanding the homeowners assistance program to take care of our wounded, ill and injured soldiers that potentially have to move and relocate, live at Walter Reed or wherever they may be, and also to affect those that are affected by permanent change of station, you know, when they have to move, you know, Texas to Colorado or, you know, their next duty station.

EDWARDS:

I think we have one minute left, if others of you'd like to...

(CROSSTALK)

KENT:

Well, we actually see a big problem out in California where (inaudible) the

most. And I would tell you right now, sir, what we're looking at is not (inaudible) I mean, you know, we used to move people constantly, like every -- you know, every couple of years from California.

But if (inaudible) actually working with the families to try to keep them on base here.

WEST:

Sir, I would echo what the sergeant major says. We're working that real hard.

FARR:

Is there enough RCI and housing to get them on base?

KENT:

We're working (inaudible) it is not enough.

PRESTON:

We provide housing for 67 percent of those that need housing that live off-post, so it's really 33 percent on base, a very small percentage.

MCKINLEY:

Chairman, can I have 15 seconds on this?

EDWARDS:

Please.

MCKINLEY:

Sometimes, sir (inaudible) of all branches of the service have to make a very difficult decision to maybe even separate and leave the military that they love because otherwise they'd be taking a \$200,000 loss on their home. That's real. But we don't have the numbers on exactly how many people there are.

CRENSHAW:

Mr. Chairman, I would -- I think this is an important problem that I'm sure

we're going to address. And maybe if you have any thoughts about how we could help, we'd love to hear that, as well.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Mr. Crenshaw. I think that is an important issue that we need to talk about.

Mr. Bishop, with your OK...

BISHOP:

I'd be happy to...

EDWARDS:

Thank you.

BISHOP:

I'd be happy to yield to Mr. Dicks. He indicated he's got another (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

(inaudible) five minutes, Dicks...

DICKS:

No, this is -- it's going to be much quicker than that.

Gentlemen, in your opinion, what is the potential utility of Web- based service to assess psychological counseling? We've got some people that are doing this, where -- and I think this would be particularly good for the Guard and Reserve, where they can get online and get counseling from a psychiatrist when they need it.

And to me, I think this helps us with the problem of people not wanting to admit that they've got a problem. If they can go online and do it confidentially, I think this should be done. We put the money in the Defense Subcommittee to do this, and we're still trying to get the Army to do it.

And we're working with Generals Chiarelli and others to get this thing moving. But why does it -- what's your reaction to that?

MCKINLEY:

Congressman Dicks (inaudible) great opportunity. Any time that we can give more tools out there for our military...

DICKS:

At least we ought to try it.

(UNKNOWN)

Yes, sir.

MCKINLEY:

Absolutely.

DICKS:

Sir, you have some that, no matter what, they have this pride factor. They're not going to go to the supervisor or first sergeant and say, "I'm having issues." But if they can do something privately, we may save somebody. So the more opportunities, the better for all our military.

WEST:

Sir, I'd just like to echo that. I think using the advanced technologies is a great thing...

DICKS:

Especially these younger kids. They understand this stuff.

WEST:

That's what they do, sir. You give a young sailor or Marine or a young adult a computer and a connection, and they're happy. They're happy there for hours.

With that said, I think leadership, communications, and education play huge into that. We have to have balance.

DICKS:

I'm not saying that is the only thing, but just as another tool, another way...

(CROSSTALK)

KENT:

... OneSource also has something on the Web site. They can actually go onto the OneSource, and they can work the counseling through there, sir.

DICKS:

What about the Guard and Reserve guys back there? What do you think?

(UNKNOWN)

Yes, sir, we currently have (inaudible) program (inaudible) and this is indicative of what they're doing today. It gives that (inaudible) for soldiers to discreetly express their desire. They feel (inaudible)

DICKS:

Thank you. There's another question here about the Pacific Northwest (inaudible) special problem up there...

(CROSSTALK)

DICKS:

I ask you that for the record.

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

(inaudible)

DICKS:

Well, I didn't want to take Sanford's time. But I'll just do it for the record. I'll just do it for the record.

(UNKNOWN)

Go ahead.

DICKS:

I've got to -- I've got to get back (inaudible) thank you, gentlemen.

(UNKNOWN)

Thank you.

(UNKNOWN)

Thank you.

EDWARDS:

Mr. Bishop?

BISHOP:

Thank you very much.

And let me take this opportunity to welcome all of you gentlemen and let me let you know that I appreciate what you do for our enlisted men and women.

I'm particularly concerned, though, about the suicide problem, particularly in the Army. I represent Fort Benning. And, of course, I have a Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany. I don't think that the Marine Corps suicide rate is quite as bad, but it bothers me.

And I just wanted to share an anecdotal experience that I had just yesterday. I got a call from a family member whose nephew was an 18-year veteran of Fort Benning, two tours in Iraq, and was in the emergency room (inaudible) community hospital after having been taken there by a friend who's also a sergeant, who went to another state, Kentucky some place, and retrieved him, where he had blacked out, been AWOL (inaudible) found out that this soldier, after his two tours, had gone through divorce, had -- immediately after the divorce, did not immediately put in the papers for change of the quarters allowance, and as a consequence was disciplined.

And in the recoupment of the housing allowance that was overpaid, his paycheck was cut in half, which sent him into a financial tizzy. Obviously, he was

suffering PTSD, but he got serious, serious discipline, lost rank, as well as lost pay, ended up being out of touch with reality, didn't know where he was, and now is hospitalized after being in the emergency room yesterday.

My question is, his discipline and the loss of the funds accelerated the onset of the stress, which obviously, you know, in this -- this sergeant, who is a friend who's looking after him with whom I spoke yesterday, says that PTSD is absolutely in the mix.

But this guy apparently was not screened and he was disciplined and, according to the sergeant, probably singled out and leaned on real heavily, which could have had the result of a suicide.

How are you getting the word down to the commanding -- the commanders of these units that they have to be sensitive to the wounded warriors? And to what extent is the comprehensive soldier fitness program going to be able to reach now?

It's a serious situation. And I understand from talking with many of the families of Iraqi veterans and Guard and Reserve families that they bring a heck of a lot home with them in the way of PTSD.

PRESTON:

Sir, I'll start. First, one of the things for the immediate future, we're going to take between 15 February and 15 March, do a mandatory stand-down day for every unit in the organization across the Army. And it's designed to (inaudible) to go back in and re-look at intervention and identification of those out there potentially on the edge for committing suicide.

We'll then follow that up with a mandatory chain-teaching program, which, you know, we've had a lot of success with the chain-teaching program we did back in October of '07 on PTSD, which is designed to start at the senior level, with the chief of staff of the Army. And it allows commanders at the senior level to take their subordinate commanders and, from a commander's perspective, teach the case of PTSD, teach what PTSD is, the symptoms, and, of course, how soldiers receive help.

And then that permeates all the way down through the organization to every level of command. So down at the company command level, for our 3,000 companies that we've got across the active Guard and Reserve, I mean, every one of those (inaudible) out there will do a chain teach (inaudible) their leadership within the organization of, you know, what are, you know, the symptoms of suicide and what are the things that we should be looking for?

And that's to really get at -- if you go back four years ago, you know, we were doing something right. And the chain teaching is really designed to make sure that, you know, we're still doing all the right things.

KENT:

The most important (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

I need to continue (inaudible) second round. This is obviously very important.

KENT:

The most important thing, sir, is the stigma. And they actually come from the leadership. They have to get rid of the stigma that it's a problem if you come forward with these issues. And that's the key right there, sir.

So I know our commandant has been pushing it hard to the leadership that it's not a problem. You know, if they come forward, we need to get them help.

BISHOP:

Sometimes they don't recognize because they haven't been screened.

EDWARDS:

Mr. Israel?

ISRAEL:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to focus for a moment on educational benefits and opportunities. Each of the witnesses alluded to educational benefits as a retention tool, as a recruitment tool, as a quality-of-life enhancement. And as I noted earlier, I focused on this as a member of the Armed Services Committee with Ike Skelton.

I don't really need to explain the importance of it to you, and actually the importance of it was explained to me by a young Marine who was a military (inaudible) for a year several years ago, Chris Myers (ph), who, when I've talked with him about the importance of linguistics and cultural awareness and preparation, said to me, "Congressman, I know exactly what you mean. After you kick in the door, you've got to know what to say." He was a highly decorated Marine who was injured in Fallujah.

I visited West Point several years ago and talked to a group of soldiers who

told me that they were deployed in Iraq, fought, came back. During their dwell time, went to Columbia University, got a graduate degree, then were deployed to Afghanistan, where they thought that they were far more effective (inaudible) strategic enhancement and those (inaudible) skills.

Chief McKinley talked about the educational mobile program that you have, distance learning, in-state tuition. And I would add to that, in terms of the importance (inaudible) talking about the tragedy of suicide rates. When people don't believe that they have a future or broader horizons, they believe there are no alternatives.

So my question to each of you is, what can we be doing to enhance accessibility and educational opportunities, particularly at the junior levels?

(UNKNOWN)

Exactly.

PRESTON:

And I think I can speak for all of us -- and, yes, one of things out there -- Mr. Chairman, I'll leave this for the record, but there's currently 36 states that support in-state tuition for servicemembers in other states. And I really would like to see the rest of the states also come on board to support, you know, our servicemembers that are serving out there in all those states.

But in-state tuition, that's not only for the servicemember, but also their children that are going to school. Education is very important.

You know, when you look across the Army, I've got, you know, 450,000 soldiers right now going to school. And this is not just brick-and-mortar professional development schools, but it's also online education. It's Army correspondence courses. It's amazing out there how much education is a very important part of all of our servicemembers' careers. So you're exactly right.

KENT:

Education is very important, sir. And (inaudible) spoke with you last weekend (inaudible) we're actually standing up our first (inaudible) enlisted PME course (ph), which is kicking off the ground. And it's going to be speaking on an operational level and (inaudible) things, so that's going to be a good thing for us in the future, sir. So we're really pushing on the PME (ph) (inaudible)

ISRAEL:

Thank you.

WEST:

Yes, sir, I'd say the same. We are pushing hard in the Navy to (inaudible) naval education and training, looking for all opportunities and all venues to get our sailors out there. We even take, as you probably know, sir (inaudible) courses, which they go afloat with our ships when we go. We (inaudible) things that we call education (inaudible) onboard our bigger ships, has been a huge success for us.

We're making headway. Do we have room to go? Yes, sir, we do. But we're making a lot of headway.

MCKINLEY:

Sir, we have the Community College of the Air Force since about 1974, '75. We've graduated over 350,000 airmen. The last two years, we've graduated the most we've ever had per year. We just started last summer the associate to bachelor program that you take your Community College of the Air Force degree, and we can apply that. We have now 35 colleges on board that you can take all 64 credit hours from the Air Force degree, apply that toward a bachelor's degree.

We believe education is very important to keep our people pointed in the right direction. And when they do choose to leave our Air Force, they're going to be better citizens.

ISRAEL:

Mr. Chairman, one of the most fascinating things I was involved in as a member of the Armed Services Committee was doing an all-day conference on professional military education that General Petraeus attended (inaudible) and, after (inaudible) this all day, the conclusion was everybody understands the value of education, but we may be too busy to learn, and operation tempo really is the obstacle to that.

And so it's important that we put value into this, but we also have to put budgets in and we have to put scheduling in. And I hope (inaudible) each of our witnesses and (inaudible) all interested parties (inaudible) figuring out (inaudible)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

That's right. Thank you, Mr. Israel.

And I am glad we took a step in the right direction. I think I had asked Mr. Miller, and he agreed, to put into an amendment in the higher education bill last

year to say, if you have a son or daughter who started school in, say, Tennessee and your country has asked the family to move to Fort Hood in Texas, in Mr. Carter's district, then that son or daughter will continue their in-state tuition until they finish.

I know that's -- there are other steps to take, but I think that was an important step forward to stop punishing military families, because our country asks them to move from one state to another.

And, Mr. Israel, your leadership on this subcommittee and working with the Defense Appropriations Committee will make a real difference on that issue.

ISRAEL:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

Thank you.

Let me just finish the first round of questioning. Let me ask Master Chief Wright and Sergeant Major Gipe and Sergeant Major Caffie if each of you -- and I'm going to stick to the five minutes here -- if each of you could just add any additional points on quality-of-life issues that you think perhaps maybe need special attention for members of the Guard and Reserve.

If (inaudible) Mr. Carter said he'd be gone at another committee meeting for a little while, perhaps if you could in this chair. And I think the transcriber could pick that up a little bit better and we can hear it, and if you could divide up the time for five minutes.

Sergeant Major?

CAFFIE:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My name is Leon Caffie. I'm command sergeant major in the (inaudible) Army Reserve (inaudible) command sergeant major (inaudible) command sergeant major (inaudible)

My problem is the reserve component. And let me please address something that was said earlier about our Reserve and National Guard soldiers. Once they return home, they're left pretty much alone. We've changed that, Mr. Chairman.

The Warrior and Family Assistance program is where (inaudible) Army Reserve. We start counseling families (inaudible) once the soldier receives a letter of intent they will be mobilized and deployed, we start counseling at that stage. This consists of doing (inaudible) when they return from the theater.

We continue to work closely with the families. We have hired 127 family readiness assistants throughout the Army Reserve in every 50 states and four territories I have Army Reserve soldiers in (inaudible) issues that we're dealing with that (inaudible) when we passed the bill last year that (inaudible) for our National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers still capped at age 60.

One component of that, if you was deployed for 90 days, you could (inaudible) so many days from that particular year. What we failed to do is make it (inaudible) soldiers that was deployed in 2001 and 2002. It's one of the major concerns that I'm getting pushback from my soldiers.

As we continue to transform the Army Reserve, we still run into difficulty with (inaudible) we will work our way through that. I think last year I brought to your attention about IDT travel, some forms (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

Right.

CAFFIE:

But other than that, I think we've made tremendous progress since last year. And thank you for what this committee have done to support my organization.

EDWARDS:

Great. Thank you, Sergeant Major.

Sergeant Major Gipe?

GIPE:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

If you could just -- out of the respect for the Navy, take about a minute-and-a-half. We'll give the Navy...

(CROSSTALK)

GIPE:

I'll do that, sir.

EDWARDS:

Thank you.

GIPE:

I am from Kentucky, but I can speak fast when I need to. I do want to correct one error. I said we had nine suicides the first quarter. It was only six. So that's an improvement. It's still way too many.

A couple of things that we need. I appreciate you all -- all of you all's support on this committee. Some of the things that we need to continue to work is the yellow ribbon legislation that was passed last year, the funding for that. It's critical to support our soldiers pre-deployment, during deployment, and on return with regards to some of the issues we've been dealing with here today, as long as -- as well as their families.

TRICARE providers is where we end up having the biggest issue when our soldiers come back home. I know my daughter, when she attended college in Bowling Green, Kentucky, had to go 48 miles to find a gynecologist that would accept TRICARE. So that's -- we've got to work that.

One thing that I think we really need to work -- it's not really the committee thing here, it's more of a congressional thing -- is employer support. We don't do enough to support the employers out there that support our troops.

And 50 percent of the Army has employers outside of their active- duty time. And we've got to do something that rewards those employers who do support us for (inaudible) because it's extremely critical.

And then the last thing I would suggest is military construction. Over 69 percent of our buildings are 50 years or older. So...

EDWARDS:

Sixty-nine percent are 50 years or older?

GIPE:

Yes, sir. So we've got a lot of opportunities out there and things that would go well with an economic stimulus, things like that.

So I'll turn it over to my (inaudible)

FARR:

Can I follow up on that question?

EDWARDS:

Sure.

FARR:

What's happening -- we have a big RCI project, but now that the community housing prices have dropped so much, even though these houses are primo houses, a lot of the families will opt to live in a community where they never would have before because the rents were too high.

So it's more than just building new housing on base. It's sort of getting that culture of living back on base (inaudible) to think about. Why are these -- why you're not using the housing we've built? You can't complain about it. It's got everything, childcare (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

That is an interesting -- I hadn't thought about people moving off-base because of lower housing. So we'll look into that.

Master Chief Wright?

WRIGHT:

Chairman Edwards, thank you for the opportunity, gentlemen.

Really, I just want to say that the sailors that are coming back, once we start the mobilization process (inaudible) education all the way through. And I have to echo what the fine gentleman before me said.

The (inaudible) progress that the Navy is using is the returning warrior program. And with that happens -- what happens with that is, once these sailors return home (inaudible) opportunity, once they return home, they have an opportunity to go away to a resort -- I don't want to put it in an odd way, but it's a nice place for the family to go where they want to attend. It's totally volunteer.

And they have an opportunity to sit down and get guidance from leadership (inaudible) leadership to walk in, the colonels, generals that walk in and say, "I have had a problem with post-traumatic stress," and they go through their leadership, where it's coming from the top, and it's OK for that young sailor (inaudible) to say, "I have an issue."

The opportunities are there for them to get counseling, get financial, Military

OneSource, mental health issues. From this point on, we've conducted about -- since fiscal year '07, we've conducted 31 events. And we've had over 2,200 participants.

I've attended one of those. And we have (inaudible) leadership to make sure they attend. But I've seen folks that walk in with their arms crossed, saying, "You can't do anything for me." And by Sunday afternoon, when they leave, they're saying, "Thank you. I didn't know that the Navy and military really cared about me."

And there's been outstanding opportunities, especially when they're able to sit down at the roundtable. The military member has dealt with a lot of issues while they're deployed, while their spouse has dealt with the heating blowing out, the car blowing out. And once they had the opportunity to interact, it's like (inaudible) all together and there's a lot of healing that goes on.

And the other side of it is the TRICARE, making sure we have the providers for that, and the distance and travel. I have sailors that are traveling from one coast to another because they love the Navy. They're losing money. Most of the senior leadership (inaudible) but when I have a sailor that's doing it, and they're actually losing money that weekend, but (inaudible) every weekend, I can't ask for any more, sir.

I mean, they're there because they're doing relevant work, and we know they're making a difference.

EDWARDS:

OK.

WRIGHT:

They're volunteering to keep doing that.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Master Chief.

WRIGHT:

Thank you, sir.

EDWARDS:

To begin the second round, we'll begin with Mr. Wamp, Mr. Farr, and then

Mr. Crenshaw.

Mr. Wamp?

WAMP:

Well, I've got kind of several questions in different directions, but picking up on what Ander Crenshaw raised and the master sergeant just talked about on the financial side of -- of the troops, sort of at the bottom end, do we have more (inaudible) is payday lending, predatory lending, you talked about car breaking down.

How many of them are still turning to finance vehicles that are not good for them? Do we know if we're moving that down to where they've got alternatives? This is such a hard time for everybody, and prices that -- last year, when gas went through the roof, and that becomes an issue, and people are upside-down.

What are you seeing? And anything we need to do, in terms of predatory activity around our troops that might be upside-down, taking some of this stress off the family, because it's all about staying ahead?

PRESTON:

Sir, and I'll just say that I don't have any specific numbers, but just, you know, talking with soldiers and their families out there, when the gas prices were very high, it was very, very tough on them. And you've got 67 percent of your married soldiers living off the installation. That means that they're commuting back and forth everyday to work. And, you know, it's just -- it's just the cost of living every day that's gone up.

And I'm also a member -- I sit on the board of directors for Apies (ph), along with Chief McKinley. And one of the things that we noticed was that, you know, it was interesting, you know, when we sat there on the board, we looked at the financial statistics. You know, the sales in Apies (ph) actually went up.

And when you look at the rest of the economy, Wal-Mart was the only other one. So you obviously, you know, the soldiers and servicemembers are shopping at those places where, you know, they can get the best buy.

KENT:

It is some hard times out there, sir. Payday lenders was the big problem out in California at the Camp Pendleton area. What had happened was even California had passed a state law. And the lenders has pretty much drawn down. I mean, they pretty much are going out of business because of the law that they passed in California.

And, also, we've been very active down at Camp Pendleton, you know, teaching them, you know (inaudible) about the finance (inaudible)

WEST:

Sir, we've held both lectures, seminars, training on not only predatory lending, but the financial responsibilities for our sailors (inaudible) seen a decrease in it. And what we (inaudible) Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society is (inaudible) called the Quick Assist Loan. It's QAL. It's a fund of about \$300 in one shot. And when I say one shot, it's you walk in, you walk out with a check (inaudible)

But it's a huge success for us. What we've seen is (inaudible) increase, but they pay them back, but it gets them past what they need to get to, to get to the -- you know (inaudible) on course again (inaudible) but we've really hit that hard. And I think that we're headed in the right direction.

Our fleet and family support centers have made that a priority. And they've gone proactive on the waterfronts, as well. I (inaudible) the numbers, but we've gotten 137,000 of our sailors touched this past year, which is a 51 percent increase over '07. So we are (inaudible) more out (inaudible)

MCKINLEY:

Sir, with the Air Force, it starts in the recruiting office. We make sure that, before we recruit somebody, that they don't have a debt ratio that's going to set them up for failure for the future.

Once we get them to basic training, even in basic training we teach them financial counseling and how to manage your budget and be smart about what (inaudible) future. We get that when they arrive at their first duty location and hopefully set them up for success in the future to spend wisely.

And the bill we passed on predatory lending, I think, was a tremendous success. Thank you very much for making that happen.

WAMP:

Maybe we're running out of time, but, Master Chief West, on the home court (ph) provision, because I know when I went out on the USS Harry Truman -- I told you about that this morning -- pretty tight quarters.

WEST:

Yes, sir.

WAMP:

Out there for a long period of time, unlike the other services when they get in. Go a little bit more into what we can do to help you when they are home making that quality of life good enough to go back out at sea for six months.

WEST:

Yes, sir. As I pointed out (inaudible) we have about 9,000 of our sailors that (inaudible) a ship. Until you've done that and experienced it, it's a pretty tough environment out there (inaudible) sailors. My hat's off to them every single day.

So now we have a master housing plan that we're presenting to the CNO in a couple of weeks which will provide I guess a landscape on what we can do. Through a public-private venture, which is out in -- two (inaudible) out in California (inaudible) Pacific Beacon (inaudible) I will take you (inaudible) haven't seen that, I'd welcome you to come. I'll even show you the way (inaudible) great quality-of- life living, which is going to put about 2,900 spaces. And then, down in Virginia, in Hampton Roads, about 3,600 spaces.

Our challenge right now is really in three locations, but we certainly do need that help. But our three locations are Norfolk, Virginia. We have, again, about 5,700 of our sailors living on board the ships. In Yokosuka, Japan (ph), 700. In California, about 700.

Even with the plan in place, it's going to be very tough for us to get these folks ashore. One of the things that we're asking to do is, you know, double up, go through the Marine Corps model and the college model, for that matter, sort of the one-plus-one, put a couple of our young sailors in there (inaudible)

I will tell you -- and this is a success story out in Japan, even though we have a shortfall there, we've (inaudible) and with that (inaudible) they've had a significant decrease in the amount of incidents out on the economy. And you know as well as I do. It is a big deal anywhere, but more so in Japan (inaudible) American sailors.

I do (inaudible) couple of slides that do show that, sir. And just (inaudible) don't want to get too deep into it, but it shows the number of beds (inaudible) the number of our sailors (inaudible) because, again, as I pointed out earlier to Congressman Dicks, I do believe that you give a sailor a WiFi and a computer, and that's what they want, really just to get away, get away from that ship.

So I would ask this committee for -- to help us out. And I'm sure (inaudible) bachelor housing area (inaudible) really need some support there. And, also, go in -- a lot of our buildings are aging, as well. And that's one thing that we've got to tackle.

WAMP:

Mr. Chairman, that (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

Did he really?

WAMP:

(inaudible) where I live (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

So he got good training.

WAMP:

(inaudible)

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Mr. Wamp.

(UNKNOWN)

He wants to know (inaudible) register to vote.

(LAUGHTER)

EDWARDS:

We'll go with Mr. Farr, Mr. Crenshaw, and then Mr. Berry.

Mr. Farr?

FARR:

Thank you very much.

Again, thank you for all this good, lovely dialogue. I have a lot of questions, one I would like to follow up on that was (inaudible) want to get into something

that I'm very interested in, and that is really trying to integrate the capabilities of the services and the interagency with our allies (inaudible) partners across the full spectrum of operations.

I mean, what we've learned in this committee is that there's -- we are the best in the world at being able to go anywhere at any time, kick down any door, do anything we have to do. But (inaudible) we have not done a very good job at winning hearts and minds. And so we can get in, but we can't get out.

And, you know, my whole experience was in the Peace Corps (inaudible) actually had to work yourself out of a job. And what (inaudible) what I've seen about soldiers, a lot of them get really interested in sort of that cross-cultural experience, coming -- you know, young kids coming out of the United States, never really living that way or having to live parachuted into another culture and other languages, the conditions of poverty, and so on, and develop a (inaudible) interest in, you know, if -- how are we going to change these host country folks (inaudible) to have some of the values that we have?

You know, I think that's a much longer and stronger effort. But the only people that I think are going to do it (inaudible) use the military (inaudible) nation-building, I'm convinced that the best effective force in building nation-building are our military, because you're on the ground, you're in the spot. You can do wells. You can do schools. You can do things like that.

Are we -- I'm concerned that we have 33,000 U.S. contractors performing for the Army. And I wonder, is that getting in the way -- is there a way that we can do a better upgrading of teaching, you know, sort of -- teaching people to teach themselves (inaudible) things that we all believe in, sort of community development that the military could do, one, to decrease violence and, two, to leave it better than you found it?

I mean, what are we missing in this? Because it's the soldiers on the ground (inaudible) embassies are all locked up and nobody can go out without being guarded, and same with USAID. But I've heard out at conferences at the Naval Postgraduate School it's the -- it's the international nongovernmental organizations that are on the ground with the soldiers.

And the one thing they have in common, they're both getting shot at. And they're both trying to do the same -- the military a little bit more to secure -- for security purposes, but in the end make it secure for what? I mean, and that seems to me what we have not (inaudible) what we need to do.

PRESTON:

Sir, I would encourage you to get out and visit with our soldiers. And I'll give you a couple of examples, because the Army has done a magnificent job at working itself (inaudible) and as I travel around, you know, I get a lot of questions from young soldiers about (inaudible) in Iraq and Afghanistan, but, you know, historically we've done a magnificent job.

You look at Bosnia, December 1995, 20,000 soldiers that went there. November of '04, when we pulled out, there was less than 900 soldiers there. So it took us eight years to go from 20,000 soldiers to less than 900, and then we handed that mission over to the European Union.

FARR:

(inaudible) Bosnia now?

PRESTON:

Just a couple of people in the headquarters. That's it.

Kosovo, spring, summer of 1999, 14,000 soldiers that were part of that campaign. Today, Army National Guard, about 1,400 that's there. And, you know, and they've done a magnificent job over there at building. It's helping the government become operational, and it's the government at all levels. It's at the national level. It's the county, province, down to all the small towns and villages.

But you've got to get the government operational. And then it's training the security forces to take our place. And as those security forces become competent, that allows us (inaudible) and I'll give you a couple of quick stories from Iraq and Afghanistan.

FARR:

Do our soldiers need more language training, cultural training?

PRESTON:

And I think we've worked very hard. The last couple of years, we've put -- I mean, across the board, all of us, cultural training right now before any (inaudible) deploys, as well as language training.

And when we look at the different language schools that are out there, we are leveraging that right now. And there are soldiers in every unit and organization that are deploying right now that are taking language training.

Well, I'll give you a quick story. I was just down at Fort Polk (inaudible) class down there (inaudible) 56th Stryker Brigade out of the Pennsylvania Guard. And he was one of their trainers. And I asked him how long he had been an (inaudible) and he said, "Sir, I've only been here about seven months."

And I said, "Where was you at before that?" He said, "I was in Iraq. I was in Baghdad. I was on a training team."

And I said, "Well, what did you think of that?" And he said, "Sir, I'd go back in a minute." And I said, "Well, why do you say that?" And he said, "Because I was able to make a difference and it was the friendships that were developing."

And he said that, "I was out everyday with a squad of Iraqi soldiers that I helped train. And one day, we came under fire. There was a sniper that was firing at us. We took cover behind a concrete barrier. And as I came up to shoot my weapon, Sergeant Oman, who was -- I was, you know, his teacher, he pushes me back down behind the concrete barrier and he says, 'Stay down.'"

"And, of course, I told him, I says, 'Oman, you know, I've got to get up. I've got to be able to shoot.' And Oman told him, 'Stay down. Today is not your day to die.'" And that was the kind of close bonding relationships over there that we (inaudible) between us and the Iraqi soldiers.

I was just there in November. I spoke with Command Sergeant Major Adell (ph), who's a sergeant major in the Army, the Iraqi army, close, personal friend of mine. And I was there for their third annual senior NCO conference and there with all of his division command sergeant majors, across the Iraqi army, and we're all brothers, and we're very close friends in what we're doing right now to help each other.

Now, in Afghanistan, a sergeant major in the army -- Rashan (ph) is a sergeant major in the army for the Afghan army. He's a graduate of class 56 at our -- United States Army (inaudible) academy. I mean, he's half-American. He spent an entire year down there with us going through the school.

And, you know, when you look at the relationships and what him and, you know, the chief of staff of the Afghan army, General Bishmail Kahn (ph), you know, when he spoke at their conference in November, I told General Casey that, when their chief of staff sat up there and spoke, had he been wearing one of our uniforms and speaking English, you would have thought he was one of our American generals, because he was saying all the right things.

But we've done a lot of things. And I can tell you about...

FARR:

How about contractors?

PRESTON:

We've got contractors out there, but they're really in support of the soldiers there on the ground. And, you know, we don't have enough of the combat support, service support kind of functions that those contractors right now are doing.

EDWARDS:

Brief statement?

WEST:

Sir, I just got -- as that question was asked, I was coming up in and out of my chair, because, I'll tell you, it's a great question. We're working almost everyday with NGOs, or nongovernmental organizations.

We've deployed Comfort and Mercy. You talk about winning the hearts and minds of all these countries. It's an incredible thing to see, the capability (inaudible) those ships bring, more importantly, how many people line up and want us back.

We use our amphibians in that way, but we also have our sailors -- we've got 12,000 -- over 12,000 of our sailors right now on the ground over there in Iraq and Afghanistan, up in the hills, in the provisional reconstruction teams.

I was just out there with our CNO. And we got to fly out to a place where they're building some schools and all that stuff. It's incredible. It's incredible in the way those countries and those people come to us and want our help.

So I've got to tell you, your Navy's out there. We're engaging every single day with those NGOs. And it's just an incredible feeling.

But (inaudible) if you're ever either in San Diego or the (inaudible) able to come down to the Comfort or the Mercy, please. I'll give you a personal tour of those two (inaudible)

KENT:

Can I make a 30-second comment, sir?

EDWARDS:

Sure, go ahead.

KENT:

Western Iraq used to be a bloody place. I was there in '04 and '05. And the Marines today over there is able to turn off the kicking in the doors and they're out there actually helping the locals each and every day.

And that's the young PFCs on the ground. They know when to turn it on and kick down doors and when to turn it off and help the Iraqi people.

EDWARDS:

That's great.

MCKINLEY:

Sir, just a second?

EDWARDS:

Yes.

MCKINLEY:

It's not only Iraq and Afghanistan, sir, but we're doing capacity-building in many countries, whether it be in the Pacific, to South America, from the African continent to all over Europe. And more funding to help with this would be -- be fantastic.

But to build the military through professional military education and so forth through our COCOMs and each one of our services is a great thing. And it's going to make us all safer in the long run.

EDWARDS:

OK. Thank you all.

Mr. Crenshaw?

CRENSHAW:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Yes, you know, that whole discussion -- somebody (inaudible) you really can't surge friendship, you know, and the things that you're doing in the front end, AFCOM (ph), you know, in the Caribbean, those potential hotspots I think what your men and women are doing, just to build relationships, you just don't walk in one day and say, you know, "Now we're your friend" (inaudible)

Let me go back to -- we started the conversation about kind of in a specific part of health care, suicide prevention, et cetera (inaudible) big picture, health care is so important, the quality of life of not only the men and women who serve, but the families.

And I know we've done a lot -- the chairman's been real active in some of the

military construction projects. We've built some new facilities, you know, new clinics, new hospitals. And we want to keep on doing that.

But I want to ask you all, just in terms of overall health care, just the delivery of health care, what would you say are the good things that we do? What are some of the things that we ought to do better?

And what do you hear -- what do your troops say when they talk about health care? What are some of the, you know, the just kind of -- when people are sitting around talking, "We wish you did a little better," or, "We're really thankful for, you know, this part or that part," can you touch on that, just some real-world examples that you see? Because I've got to believe that's so important for families, particularly.

PRESTON:

Sir, I'll start. Last week, we had the Army Family Action Plan. And this is a conference that we did here in D.C., but it stems out and it starts out on (inaudible) all around the Army, overseas, as well.

And it starts with the soldiers and families (inaudible) installations and they raise issues (inaudible) installations (inaudible) those representatives at the installation level come to the annual conference. And then (inaudible) leadership.

And everybody from the secretary of the Army, the chief of staff of the Army are there (inaudible) and one of the top five issues that was raised this last week that has now been added is there's a shortage of medical providers in military treatment facilities.

And that's -- you know, hands down, that's always been a concern out there as you travel around. It's accessibility and availability. The quality of the care is very good, once you get into it, but it's accessibility, it's availability.

And, of course, we've tried to stem that by partnering with medical communities and facilities off (inaudible) as well, but I just -- there's still not enough. The Army is very big, and, you know, being able to get out there into all those remote sites, as Command Sergeant Major Gipe, Command Sergeant Major Caffie said, it's to TRICARE providers (inaudible)

(CROSSTALK)

PRESTON:

... to travel to get somebody that takes TRICARE. And that's a concern.

KENT:

The quality is very good, sir, but the shortage of doctors is the issue.

WEST:

Sir, the same here. I'll tell you, I could not be more happier with our Navy medicine (inaudible) Marine Corps (inaudible) that aspect. They do a lot of good things.

I would say if there's any one thing, it's continue to keep that ball in the air for us. You know, sir, you drop that ball, and we start missing things, but, you know, you see those (inaudible) assistance you could provide, that would really be (inaudible)

MCKINLEY:

Sir, I think we've come a very long way since 1995 when we started TRICARE. But I think one of the big improvements we can do to make it more attractive for civilian health care providers is to take out a lot of the bureaucracy that we can right now.

You may have -- someone goes to visit a doctor's office (inaudible) Blue Cross-Blue Shield in just a matter of a few minutes (inaudible) to see the doctor and the paperwork is taken care of. You got to the doctor with TRICARE and it's an hour's worth of paperwork. And a lot of doctors just don't want to put up with it.

We need to clear up the bureaucracy and make it easier and more attractive for civilian doctors that want to take (inaudible)

CRENSHAW:

Thank you, sir.

EDWARDS:

Thanks. Before I recognize Mr. Berry, I want to take the (inaudible) privilege of welcoming to our subcommittee Mrs. Zach Wamp, Kim Wamp, and their son, Weston.

And as chairman of the committee, let me -- I don't want to embarrass the ranking member of the committee in your presence, but I want to thank you both for the sacrifices you've made for the time Zach often has to spend away from family to his leadership in this committee. And we're thrilled to have you both. And the subcommittee is very privileged to have Zach as our ranking member.

Zach, would you like to (inaudible)

WAMP:

I'm going to rat out my son, who's a senior at the University of Tennessee and about to graduate magna cum laude May the 1st. He and Kim are here for the National Prayer Breakfast, which I'm very involved in each week, and they just came into town.

But they had not been to a committee hearing in this room since I joined as ranking member. And I have to tell you that my son, when you were under consideration as vice president, we started rooting for that ticket just because of our relationship. So you had one Republican working for...

(CROSSTALK)

WAMP:

At least we'll have somebody in the White House that we know (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

And my Republican campaign opponent was rooting for me, as well. But, Weston, thank you -- thank you very much.

(LAUGHTER)

And it is great to have you both here.

I think the top enlisted leaders of our services that are here symbolize the people making a difference for our country and our military aren't only those that have on the uniform or wear the title of member of Congress, but spouses and the children. So we welcome you.

And your sacrifice (inaudible) sacrifices made by our military families (inaudible) that you're here. Welcome.

Mr. Berry?

BERRY:

Well, I would just thank all of you for your service and the great job you do. I think this committee's committed to doing our best that we can to see that you have what you need to do that job and do it well.

Master Chief West, you're from the same neck of the woods as our colleague, Mr. Wamp. I'm wondering, what made you turn out so well?

(LAUGHTER)

WEST:

Sir, I just have to say that I am just across the Georgia line.

BERRY:

That explains it.

(CROSSTALK)

BERRY:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Mr. Berry.

And welcome back to the subcommittee. You've been a great member of the subcommittee. And just you're here personally every committee hearing unless you have an absolute conflict with other hearings. And we thank you for that. Thank you for being here.

Let me continue a tradition of this subcommittee, if I could, and just ask each of you really two questions. First would be, in terms of quality-of-life morale issues, is it -- would it be fair for me to say that -- or to conclude from your comments that time away from family is the number-one (inaudible) right now? Would that be a yes (inaudible)

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

Let the record show that time away from family is the number-one quality-of-life issue right now. Moving beyond that and putting aside pay, because we know that's always crucial to those serving our country, if we were to be arbitrary and to, say, take education, whether it's for the serviceman or woman or their family, education, health care, housing, and daycare, while we have a responsibility to address all of those four areas, could I ask you to make your own judgment and say, speaking for your respective servicemen and women and their families, which would you rank as the number-one challenge where we need to put more resources? What would be number two, number three, if you want to?

KENT:

(inaudible) Marine barracks?

EDWARDS:

Yes.

KENT:

I would (inaudible) sir.

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

So barracks improvement...

KENT:

Yes, sir.

EDWARDS:

OK.

KENT:

As we grow the force, we're going to need other space.

EDWARDS:

OK. How about second, Sergeant Major?

KENT:

Second would be daycare, sir.

EDWARDS:

OK. Daycare after barracks?

KENT:

Yes, sir.

EDWARDS:

OK.

Sergeant Major Preston?

PRESTON:

(inaudible) childcare (inaudible) working in the right direction (inaudible) priority right now, but childcare, barracks are the top two, and then health care. That's the other (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

OK.

PRESTON:

(inaudible)

EDWARDS:

The two of you, the sense is we've made progress on family housing. It's not that we need to stop, draw a line in the sand and stop improving military family housing, but we at least -- our servicemen and women (inaudible) and they're seeing real change, so we're behind the curve more on barracks versus (inaudible) barracks versus family housing, you're saying barracks (inaudible) family housing?

Master Chief West?

WEST:

Sir, I've got to agree over here. I'll tell you, the bachelor housing is absolutely the number-one priority. With that said, the family housing, what this committee has done -- and through our PPV partnerships -- is phenomenal. In my 28 years in the Navy, I've never seen any better housing (inaudible)

Daycare is another one. I know we've made huge strides (inaudible) we've got (inaudible) very successful (inaudible) rate as we roll out, so we're making headway there.

And also with health care, we've got to keep all three of those up in the air, but my number-one priority without a doubt is housing.

EDWARDS:

OK.

WEST:

Bachelor housing.

EDWARDS:

OK, bachelor housing.

WEST:

Yes, sir.

EDWARDS:

Chief McKinley?

MCKINLEY:

Sir, I don't think that I'd really necessarily put them as a one-two-three. I think it's a package deal. You know, I think each one of them are equally important. And you can't really have one without the other, so we've made tremendous strides in each one of those. But each one of those is (inaudible) still very important.

EDWARDS:

Sure. And I don't want to make the third or fourth list on the priority list seem less important, because they're very important. But if you only had enough money to put into one of those four areas, where would you put that money?

MCKINLEY:

Continue with housing. I think housing is very...

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

Family housing or barracks?

MCKINLEY:

Both.

EDWARDS:

All right, if you could only put money into barracks or family housing, where would you put it?

MCKINLEY:

I would right now put it into barracks, because we still have airmen out there living in barracks that are very old. The infrastructure needs to be redone. You can't put lipstick on a pig.

EDWARDS:

Right. Right.

MCKINLEY:

You've heard that one before. So you've got to go in and work with infrastructure. And that takes money.

EDWARDS:

OK.

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

And forgive me for trying to put you in a box, but I think just trying to get that sense of priorities, with limited resources -- we don't have an unlimited check

here. We should not ignore any of those areas. We want to keep making the kind of progress we've had in the last several years in all of these areas, but that's good to know.

(CROSSTALK)

FARR:

Is your BAH for a barrack the same as for a house? I mean, was is it (inaudible) if you stay in a barrack, you still pay (inaudible) housing allowance, don't you?

(CROSSTALK)

FARR:

Or if you stay in a house on base, you pay your...

WEST:

You forfeit, at that point, your BAH, if you stay (inaudible) however (inaudible) PPV, if you have a public-private venture, then you do get paid the BAH, but then you turn around and hand it back to the...

(CROSSTALK)

FARR:

(inaudible) economics there are -- for the private venture are better in building housing than in building barracks?

WEST:

We have a few barracks that are going PPV or (inaudible)

PRESTON:

(inaudible) what you have to look at is that, for a married soldier, they receive a basic allowance for housing. And they have a choice. They can...

FARR:

On-base or off-base?

PRESTON:

On-base or off-base.

FARR:

(inaudible)

PRESTON:

But they pay either way. But for the single soldier, they don't receive a housing allowance if they're living in a barracks. And, of course, if you want them to live off-base -- and we've done that to free up space in the barracks -- you know, we've taken some of our senior noncommissioned officers who are single and paid them an allowance for housing to allow them to go off and find an apartment, but, you know, that's a cost, as well.

EDWARDS:

Could I ask Master Chief Wright and Sergeant Major Gipe and Sergeant Major Caffie -- starting with you, Master Chief Wright -- could you come up to Mr. Carter's seat again? And I want -- you don't have to choose from those same four, because housing, health care, education are obviously different sometimes in terms of the challenges for the members of the Guard and Reserve.

But the quality-of-life issues, what would be the first, second, and third priorities that Congress needs to take a look at, in terms of supporting quality of life and morale for our members of the Guard and Reserve?

Master Chief Wright?

WRIGHT:

Thank you, sir. Just trying to do some quick thinking here. But I think the distance and travel, I think that's a main one.

(CROSSTALK)

WRIGHT:

... folks are going...

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

That would be -- you'd like that as number one...

WRIGHT:

Number one.

EDWARDS:

... of the concerns you hear?

WRIGHT:

The other is TRICARE, a follow-on with that. I know they're paid at the Medicaid levels. And a lot of times, when you're dealing with the medical facilities and the providers, it's all about the patriotism. They're looking at the flag, and that's (inaudible) not a lot of incentive there for it.

And on the other side of it, just making sure we have good, quality facilities for these folks to come and train, too. A majority of that time, they're training with the units and doing everything they have to. But when they are at the reserve site, or the NOSC, Navy Operational Support Center, they have quality facilities to work in.

EDWARDS:

OK.

WRIGHT:

(inaudible) top three, sir.

EDWARDS:

Thank you, Master Chief.

Sergeant Major Gipe?

GIPE:

Again, sir, without a doubt, health care is our number-one issue. Education is

up there, but with the G.I. Bill and most states provide tuition assistance for Guard and Reserve members, so without a doubt it's the TRICARE and the yellow ribbon piece of the health care that relates to post-traumatic and those kind of...

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

What training equipment (inaudible) secondhand or (inaudible)

GIPE:

We're doing very, very well on the equipping course. We're not where we need to be yet, but there is a plan to get there. And the funding is dedicated long term to get there.

The military construction to improve the facilities that we have to train in would have to be up there, as well. But there is a great plan in place for (inaudible) up there. And the Army's done a phenomenal job with getting this, as well as Congress, funding the money for that.

EDWARDS:

Thanks, Sergeant Major.

GIPE:

Thank you.

(UNKNOWN)

(inaudible)

GIPE:

Yes, sir. That's really what the issue is. It's the provider issue. And then we alluded to Military OneSource for counseling sessions and the online things.

Things are getting better all the time, but TRICARE providers is a huge issue for us, because they're just not out there and available and where they should be. If we could get that fixed, that would be huge.

FARR:

(inaudible) military clinic (inaudible) for the uniforms, but the spouses and children have to go to the private sector, and they don't want to take TRICARE reimbursements (inaudible)

CRENSHAW:

(inaudible)

GIPE:

Of course, we have many soldiers that don't live anywhere near a military facility, so...

(CROSSTALK)

EDWARDS:

Thanks, Sergeant Major.

Sergeant Major Caffie?

CAFFIE:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Priority number one for me would be health care. I think we've already addressed the issues with bureaucracy and paper flow. We need to enhance the (inaudible) physicians and nurses within that program.

Second for me would be the distance. As we transform (inaudible) primary concern. I have soldiers driving excess to 250 to 300 miles (inaudible) that we do not compensate them for.

And third would be equipment and renovating the installations that I have (inaudible) Reserve.

EDWARDS:

Thank you all.

Any members -- any of you want to follow up on that? OK.

Mr. Carter?

CARTER:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

Welcome back to the subcommittee...

(CROSSTALK)

CARTER:

... these fine gentlemen for (inaudible) go to a meeting with the leadership.

And, Sergeant Major Preston, I want to talk to you a little bit about this Army family (inaudible) you talked about. Chairman Edwards has played a major role in establishing the RCI, the housing program. And we've made great strides in military housing. We're all well aware of it, all of you are.

However, I visited Fort Hood many times a year and toured several times an area called Chaffee Village. Are you familiar with Chaffee Village?

PRESTON:

(inaudible)

CARTER:

I don't know what year it was built, but it has to be in the '50s, because it looks old. It's got 674 enlisted soldiers and their families living there. And Chaffee Village is part of the RCI program. We're spending about \$40,000 a unit to make them more livable, but, quite frankly, this is, in my opinion, like putting lipstick on a pig.

I mean, these are old units. We're patching them up. But in reality, there's not anything around here that that's old that's patched up like that.

And the real issue is we've got to provide this quality of life that we promised them, that we covenant this Army family covenant.

Now, even if these additional funds are provided to patch it up even more, it's not going to be where it ought to be, as compared to the other housing that we're providing for our soldiers on Fort Hood and other installations.

I know that Chairman Edwards is well aware of this, and quite a few others are. And I guess my question to all of you is, do you have housing issues like

Chaffee Village on the facilities that you visit that are still being used, they're old and being patched, putting lipstick on a pig, rather than completed?

And have you informed the powers that be, this committee and others that, of your needs in the area of examples like Chaffee Village so that they can be in the next budget that we have to deal with? Because I think this is something that it's time for us to put a spotlight on. It's livable, but it's not quality living. That's the issue.

PRESTON:

Mr. Carter, I'll just start by saying that, you know, I know Chaffee Village very well. And having been there as a battalion (inaudible) and I sponsored Comanche II. And that's why (inaudible) Comanche II up there on the (inaudible)

But, you know (inaudible) private partners that we've partnered with, with (inaudible) initiative. For those houses that did not meet the quality of life, you know, they've gone in and they completed tore them down and built a new house. And there specifically at Fort Hood, you can go around and see out on West Ford Hood, I mean, hundreds of brand-new houses out there that have been built.

Now, I get asked by a lot of soldiers out there that are living in the old houses like Chaffee or Comanche II that, you know, why they have to live in the older house while somebody else has got the newer house. And it really goes down to, what is the capitalization plan for all that housing out there?

And, really, before privatization, we as an Army did not do very good at planning for the capitalization for housing as well as our barracks. And that's why we've got a lot of old stuff out there that we're now trying to play catch up.

But with our private partner, they've got a capitalization plan so that, you know, as those houses reach the end of their life cycle, you know, they'll be torn down and those soldiers, you know, as -- either as they leave or as they, you know, transition away from the installation, will be moved into, you know, new and upgraded housing.

So the good thing now with the private partners (inaudible) capitalization plan, and you rotate through, and you eliminate the oldest stuff, and you build new.

CARTER:

Well, almost every visit I make to Fort Hood, I get -- when there's a change of command, the first place I get to have a drive through is Chaffee Village. So it is something that really is on the minds, especially of the enlisted men.

PRESTON:

And, sir, you know, too, that, you know, the private partners (inaudible) for a lot of money (inaudible)

CARTER:

They have.

PRESTON:

... Chaffee Village and fix them up. And I can talk about Fort Campbell. And, you know, when I was out at Fort Campbell when we first started the capitalization process, these old ranch- style houses, very, very old, and Command Sergeant Major Hill (ph), who's now with General Petraeus down in CENTCOM, he was still the installation sergeant major there.

And him and I have walked in and taken a look at this brand-new house that they've renovated. And him and I both looked at each other and said that, you know, if we were both specialists (inaudible) the rank that was looking at those houses now, if we were both specialists (inaudible) we'd re-enlist, you know, to live in a house (inaudible) so the private partners have really done, you know, very good at renovating and fixing up the old places, so (inaudible) provide the quality of life that we want.

CARTER:

(inaudible) other response from anybody?

KENT:

Well, we have a plan, you know, to fix housing. Thanks to all of you, the funding that we get, I'll tell you, we have some great housing in our (inaudible) so...

CARTER:

Well, I'm aware we've got some great housing units.

WEST:

Yes, sir (inaudible) with the Navy, we're on track to eliminate anything that's out there that's -- that's (inaudible) F.Y. '11 (inaudible) but what's important is our private companies, they're working real well with our family housing (inaudible) naval installations.

So like I told the members earlier, sir, it's the best housing I've seen in 28 years of service.

MCKINLEY:

Sir, I'm very passionate about this, and so is all of us here. And I've used this comparison before, but I think it's very valid. As you walk through Arlington National Cemetery, we have a standard. We take care of the fallen. They have the same markers; they have the same plot, so there's a standard, no matter what service you're in.

It's a shame we don't do this for while we're wearing the uniform. We have some that we take care of, some that we don't. We need to make sure we provide that standard while we're wearing the uniform.

CARTER:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

EDWARDS:

You know, Mr. Carter, if I could jump in, I think generally we'd all agree that privatized, public-private partnership programs work very, very well. That doesn't mean this subcommittee couldn't, you know, expend some effort reviewing it and seeing where it's working better than other areas.

And the question I couldn't answer (inaudible) is, how do you make a decision that at what point that developer at Fort Hood gets to put more money in his pocket as a profit? We want him to make a reasonable profit.

Versus, at what point maybe would -- whether (inaudible) in that case, because I don't know all the facts, but at what point are they making, you know, more than most people would consider reasonable profit, because they're renovating rather than building new enlisted housing? And I don't know how -- I guess that's...

(CROSSTALK)

CARTER:

And I guess that's kind of...

EDWARDS:

... basis. And it seems that we ought to -- if nothing else, we ought to use the

bully pulpit of this subcommittee to pressure the developers, salute them where they're doing well, but if in some cases they're, you know, renovating 50-year-old house rather than building a new one, and yet they're making very, very solid profits, maybe we ought to let them know we're going to keep an eye on them.

CARTER:

That's the thing. You know, if you're a soldier, and, you know, one guy's living in a brand-spanking-new house and his wife and kids have got this really nice house, the other guy comes back, he's coming through a clean, refurbished house built in probably 1955, and then refurbished, and it's just -- you can't help but saying he's in a substandard housing, even if it's perfectly clean, perfectly functional, everything works. It's not what the other guy has.

And that's -- and, you know, refurbishing costs a lot of money. Fixing up all the houses costs a lot of money. Maybe our money would be better spent if we started going in, in sections and tearing these things down and building new houses.

PRESTON:

Mr. Chairman, I would recommend that you take a look at it. And then the best analogy I had for the RCI housing is that it's just like getting a haircut. We're halfway through the haircut right now, so depending on which side of the head that you look at, you know, one side looks real good, but the other side -- but there is a plan out there that they are working through, so...

EDWARDS:

We might look into (inaudible) there's a plan, but in some cases they're spending \$40,000 or \$50,000 renovating the unit where they could spend \$150,000 just rebuilding a brand-new (inaudible) and, again, I don't know that I have an answer to that. I don't know if any other members do.

But it's probably -- I assume it's done again on an installation- by-installation basis where they negotiate an agreement. But I think it might be healthy. You know, we've all talked about exercising oversight. And maybe we could bring the developers in and others -- again, salute them for the good work they're doing, but also let them know we're going to look over their shoulder and make sure that they're in a time of war and multiple deployments and the sacrifices (inaudible) representing are making that we're going to expect them to err on the side of, you know, putting that extra dollar into unit housing.

CARTER:

I think our partners would give us a fair analysis of what they see as needed.

And I would hope (inaudible)

EDWARDS:

Might be a good basis for a future subcommittee hearing.

Mr. Wamp?

WAMP:

I think we're almost through. I asked Mr. Crenshaw. He has no more questions.

Judge Carter, do you have any more questions?

I just have a couple of points and then we'll be through on our side. I know time is getting late.

Going back to Mr. Farr -- and I want to publicly say how much I appreciate (inaudible) last year. I was so impressed with his insight in things around the world.

But this issue of hearts and minds, I want to say (inaudible) for Chief McKinley, you mentioned AFRICOM earlier. And I was so impressed with General Kip Ward, who's the commander.

And I wanted to ask you if we have any permanence there? I know that there was a temporary status in Djibouti and we really hadn't been accepted in a permanent basing yet, I think, of AFRICOM headquarters.

But I want to tell you this. One of our guests for the prayer breakfast is a former general who's now in the top civilian leadership of Kenya, and I was with him last night. And I asked him about this. And he told me how impressed he was with General Kip Ward and the fact that our military presence there, while it's not permanent yet, is all about making peace and basically winning the hearts and minds of people in northern Africa.

Now, of those 25 countries I mentioned earlier, quite a few of them are on the continent of Africa, as we all know. And I was asking you, because I was in Tanzania to the south not too long ago, and I asked him about that former Arab coast, Mombasa particularly, and actually I think some things are turning in a better direction.

And part of it is because our presence is welcomed. I know (inaudible) from Kenya's standpoint -- this is a Maasai tough guy general who's now in civilian leadership, and he was really impressed with the U.S. presence in northern Africa, which I think bodes well for this hearts and minds issue.

MCKINLEY:

Sir, I was just in Djibouti in November. And the leadership there is very committed (inaudible) tyranny of distance of Africa. You can basically put the United States of America in Africa three times.

So when you're looking at how we get from Point A to Point B, we've got to work that out. But the goodness that we can do there, winning the hearts and minds, it's just astronomical. So we have to stay committed and make sure that we take care and have a plan in how we can get from Point A to Point B to Point C.

EDWARDS:

Sergeant Major, you wanted to say something?

PRESTON:

You know, sir, I was (inaudible) too, as well. And, you know, (inaudible) in Djibouti (inaudible) base of operations. And we have a lot of stuff there for the (inaudible) army to help train them, as well as (inaudible) in Kenya with them.

But I flew up into Ethiopia. This is a great kind of joint team (inaudible) flew into Ethiopia, the city of Dire Dawa. It's the second largest city in Ethiopia. It's a city of about 300,000.

And I was met there on the ground by Staff Sergeant Colson (ph), who is an Army Reserve staff sergeant, who was the NCIC (ph) of a 17- member team. And his (inaudible) so he was gone. So this staff sergeant was in charge.

And he had a -- he had a team of Navy Seabees that were there, as well as a squad of artillery soldiers from Fort Sill, Oklahoma, that are doing force protection. He had an airman there, a signal who was doing the comms to keep him in touch with Camp (inaudible) but we traveled around the city.

And he took me out and showed me the 21st and 22nd water point (ph) that the Seabees have put into place for the locals to draw water from, fill up their water jugs.

They took me out to a -- there was a \$200,000 school project, primary, secondary school that they were putting into place for -- it was like first grade through eighth or ninth grade, that they were putting in place for the children to go to school.

And all the while we drove around the city, it was -- you could tell the relationship that he had built with all the locals, because they were all -- they all knew him. They were all waving at him.

But here's a young, you know, staff sergeant with seven or eight years in the Army, but, you know, and then he's helping to build a city. You know, he built a school and, you know, helping to provide water, you know, to the citizens. And, you know, it's just amazing out there to see the things that are being done.

And, you know, we're doing stuff. I had a visit from -- or an invitation from the chief of staff and sergeant major of the -- of South Africa. And I was down there with him and went around to their training facilities. And they're right now trying to build a noncommissioned officer corps like ours.

And that's one of the reasons why we're celebrating the year of the NCO. And, you know, but South America's got some unique challenges down there, as well. But, you know, we're partnering (inaudible) every one of those countries.

WEST:

Sir, if I could just add one quick point to that, it's not necessarily the 30-, 40-, 50-year-olds that are making a difference. We're having 19- and 20-year-olds going out there, negotiating deals, and working with these tribal leaders or these leaders of those communities. It's just an incredible thing.

KENT:

And we're actually doing (inaudible) you know, with the Navy every day, sir. You know, we actually (inaudible) port (inaudible) and we build minds, and bodies, and souls each and every day.

WAMP:

And one other closing thing that I want to bring up through several hearings as we go forward, Mr. Chairman, and that is that what we heard from the deputy chief of staff of the Army and Mrs. Casey, when they met with us after the election and they said that the Congress still needs to change the law so that outside foundations -- we talked about Fisher House, an example -- there are still some impediments of our free enterprise system to support the military.

And we need to look at ways to take those walls down, especially with the needs that we hear and the stress that's there and the multiple deployments. And if our private sector is willing to help and in any way the law keeps that from happening, we need to take those things down.

And they brought that to us in December over here at that dinner I attended two weeks after the election. I thought, "That's something we need to bring up over and over again until we figure out exactly how to take down these barriers to get all the support," because it -- I know they wanted help, and they know that there's stress points, and let's -- let's let them do that. We'll look into that every time.

EDWARDS:

Good suggestion (inaudible) bring in our authorizer friends, but it would certainly be something that would be important to do.

WAMP:

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

EDWARDS:

Thank you.

Do any members have any additional questions? And, obviously, you can all turn in written questions.

Mr. Farr?

FARR:

I wasn't going to have one, but I want to get back to this TRICARE issue. As I understand TRICARE, it essentially models the Medicare reimbursement rate. It does (inaudible) rates by region. So, say, the San Diego region.

The problem is that (inaudible) providers don't want to take that rate because it's too low or the process is too much of a hassle. It's very difficult to change the rate because it's (inaudible) but it should be not difficult to change the hassle.

How much is this problem is rate? And how much of it is just the bureaucracy? Because we contract out, you know. We put that out to a huge contract, multibillion-dollar contract, and then they screw it up, because we get a new provider every six years and we had to change all the forms, and all the telephone numbers, and all the contacts, and all the appeals.

Do you have any suggestions of how we -- because you all mentioned that there was -- some of this was the problem of bureaucracy or...

MCKINLEY:

Sir, I think a lot of the health care providers out there, they're dedicated Americans. They love our military, like everybody else, and they're probably willing to take that little less money. But if the bureaucracy, if the paperwork was much easier for them, I think that would help a lot.

FARR:

Do you have any -- could you get a memo on that about what for example?

MCKINLEY:

We can get back to you on that, sir.

FARR:

(inaudible) the specifics.

MCKINLEY:

Yes, sir (inaudible) about what that bureaucracy is?

PRESTON:

I guess, as I kind of look at it, sir -- and I know for the health care providers out there, they've got a kind of balance. And they are. They're very patriotic, and they try to balance the number of people that they're seeing between, you know, the high end and the low end. So they have a balance.

But there's a stigma, also, because of -- and TRICARE, I have to give them credit. I mean, they've been working very hard to improve their process of the paperwork and making it more automated.

But there's also a stigma out there. And, you know, I had, you know, a command sergeant major out of the Texas National Guard who was living out in Midland or Odessa, and to find a health care provider, the specialist they needed, they had to go all the way to Fort Worth.

And that's the challenges. It's now working through and demonstrating that some of the processes have improved. They've gotten better. And it's now getting more of the civilian health care folks out there now to sign up and take TRICARE.

EDWARDS:

Important issue. Thank you, Sam.

Let me finish as Mr. Wamp began the meeting. We're privileged and humbled to be at the table with you and to have an opportunity to thank you with a word for what you have done for our country and all of those men and women that you represent so ably have done.

And we want to thank you with our deeds, as well, with better health care and housing and quality-of-life support that the servicemen and women you represent deserve.

So this is a great way. I can't think of a better way to start up the new Congress than to have this, our first subcommittee hearing. Again, that's a testament of our respect to you.

Thanks to each of you for your leadership. We look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead.

With that, we will stand adjourned until -- well, subject to the call of the chair.

Let me just say to all the members, my staff just sent me a note that said there's a bill scheduled for vote any moment now. So before you can go running back to your office building, you might want to check on the floor.

Thank you very much.

CQ Transcriptions, Feb. 4, 2009

List of Panel Members and Witnesses

PANEL MEMBERS:

REP. CHET EDWARDS, D-TEXAS CHAIRMAN

REP. SAM FARR, D-CALIF.

REP. NORM DICKS, D-WASH.

REP. ALAN B. MOLLOHAN, D-W.VA.

REP. PATRICK J. KENNEDY, D-R.I.

REP. ALLEN BOYD, D-FLA.

REP. SANFORD D. BISHOP JR., D-GA.

REP. MARION BERRY, D-ARK.

REP. DAVID R. OBEY, D-WIS. EX OFFICIO

REP. ZACH WAMP, R-TENN. RANKING MEMBER

REP. ANDER CRENSHAW, R-FLA.

REP. C.W. BILL YOUNG, R-FLA.

REP. JOHN CARTER, R-TEXAS

REP. KAY GRANGER, R-TEXAS

REP. JERRY LEWIS, R-CALIF. EX OFFICIO

WITNESSES:

KENNETH PRESTON, SERGEANT MAJOR OF THE ARMY

CARLTON KENT, SERGEANT MAJOR OF THE MARINE CORPS

RICK WEST, MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE NAVY

RODNEY MCKINLEY, CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE AIR FORCE

JOHN GIPE, COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR, ARMY NATIONAL
GUARD

LEON CAFFIE, COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR, ARMY RESERVE

RONNEY WRIGHT, FORCE MASTER CHIEF, NAVAL RESERVE FORCE

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